A Star to Steer Her By

by ShadesOfMauve

Summary

After being revived by Cerberus, Shepard is not quite the stable commander that Joker remembers, and he's surprised to find himself helping her pick up the pieces. Follows ME2 with a focus on the interstitial non-mission bits.
A wobbly view of a tiled floor, splattered with vomit. Charming.

Joker sighed and put his head in his hands. Keeping track of Shepard through her helmet cam was always a mixed blessing — watching a friend get shot at in real-time when you couldn't do anything wasn't exactly relaxing — but this vid was more disturbing than most. He'd gone well past the stage of being impressed by the sheer quantity of alcohol she could put away. Shouldn't the bartender have cut her off? "Put more stuff in the thing more stuff goes in" had to be one of the top ten 'this person should not be served more alcohol' signs.

He waited until EDI informed him that the Commander was safely aboard and it was clear they weren't leaving dock this shift, then went down to talk to Chakwas.

Garrus had gotten there first, and was getting the sharp side of the doctor's tongue.

"What did you think you were doing, letting her drink like that?"

The turian was slumped over with his head in his hands. "It never occurred to me that it'd be a problem. It's not like we've never stopped for a drink before." He looked up at the doctor apologetically. "She's not some irresponsible merc. This is Commander Shepard. In all my experience she's never been anything other than the epitome of self-control. She hardly let herself get tipsy when we all celebrated after Sovereign."

Joker remembered that party. The beginning of it, anyway. He wasn't a big drinker himself — too many unpleasant episodes with necessary painkillers had left him faintly repulsed by the idea of being nauseous and wobbly for fun — but the night everyone had been clamoring to buy a drink for the crew of the Normandy, that had been… well. A Night to Not Remember.

Shepard had somehow managed to keep herself almost sober without offending any of the celebrants, and while she'd always had a glass in her hand, the only sign had been a slightly easier grin.

Joker snagged one of the doc's chairs. "She had more than her usual at Afterlife, too. But, y'know, it turned out to be poisoned and now the bartender's dead, so I'd kinda forgotten about it."

Chakwas nodded. "I should have noticed earlier, as well. When she brought me the brandy we had such a good time. I didn't think anything of it, it was just nice to see her relaxed and real, but, well," she blushed. "She drank me under the table. Or onto it. Woke up hours later on my own examining bed, and she must have put me there."

Joker's eyebrows shot up. "You? She wasn't joking about her cybernetic liver, then. That's sick."

The doctor looked faintly embarrassed. The slight, elegant older woman had won more bets than he could count by calmly out-drinking stunned new-recruits, and had a quiet reputation as the hardest head on the Normandy SR1, saving perhaps Wrex. When questioned about it, she'd respond "Well, I am a military doctor."
Garrus sounded angry. "Did Cerberus do something to Shepard?"

"Well, besides the whole bringing-her-back-to-life thing."

The doctor shook her head. "She processes alcohol much faster, and her upgraded system removes toxins more efficiently, so it takes a lot to get her drunk and she recovers quickly."

She gestured at a med scan lying on her desk, one of her many attempts to catalog the various changes in their commander. "It's not like they physically installed vices. Maybe she just needs time. Brought back, put straight to work, missing two years… I don't have any experience to know how to help with any of that."

Joker snorted. "Yeah, psychological ramifications of being recently dead. I don't think they have that one listed in the DSM XVIII."

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It was cold, bitter cold, and there was a roaring in her ears even though it was dead quiet, she was tangled and caught even though there was nothing around, nothing, nothing…

Shepard fought her way out of her restless sleep as she had every night since being revived, breathless, panicked, and drenched in sweat. She glared at the twist of sheets that entangled her. How did they get like that? Years of sleeping on the streets, barely covered by an emergency blanket, had conditioned her young — she hardly even twitched in her sleep, a habit reinforced by a lifetime of cramped military racks. If she'd dreamt, she didn't remember the dream. The drinking binge hadn't worked out as a sleep-aid. She'd have to try it in her cabin next time.

She peeled the sweat soaked layers away, stripped, and went to the head. A searingly hot shower woke her as much as she could be, then she stood staring at herself in the mirror.

She hadn't bothered to turn on the lights. She didn't need to. The cool light of the emergency strips blended with the faint red glow of the Cerberus scars to show everything she wanted to see. If she let her eyes unfocus, the fiery lines were all she could see. Her brown skin faded into the background of the ship, until there was no Rhi Shepard, only the marks of Cerberus. She ran her hands — smooth, uncalloused by a gun grip and unscarred by fights — over her sides, trying again to feel the cybernetics she knew were there.

Frustrated, she pulled on a shipsuit and did up her hair.

_You have a job to do. Figure out what's bothering you; deal with it._

It wasn't an impressive mantra, but she wasn't much for spiritual crap. She paced to the center of the room, folded herself down onto the soft deck matting, and began the process of controlling her breathing.

The silence in her quarters was uncanny. The old Normandy had captain's quarters on the crew deck, where it should be, where she could hear the constant murmur of activity, of crews coming off shift, laughter or swearing muffled by heavy bulkheads. It had still been too large for her comfort, but it was a damn sight better than this isolated palace. She glared at the empty aquarium. Who decided to spend credits on _that_?

Not working. Breathe.

Even if she was on the crew-deck, it wouldn't be _her_ crew she was hearing. It wouldn't be Alliance crew, the organization that had given structure to her entire adult life. It would be Cerberus people,
Cerberus employees eating, drinking, playing games to pass off-time, complaining about racks.

*So make them your people. Talk to them.*

How could she make that bond when she wasn't even sure of the people she already knew? They'd changed by two years, and she hadn't. Chakwas had joined for Joker, and Joker had joined for...? He'd been nonchalant about it, as if joining a terrorist organization was a natural career move, and she realized she desperately wanted there to be more to the story. Was he really that shallow?

_Damn it, Joker, I trusted you..._

*No, don't prejudge. Make them your people. Start with the ones you know.*

She pulled herself off the floor and left the cabin.

—

It was a dead shift, late ship's time, when the commander came to visit. She didn't say anything at first, just collapsed into the empty co-pilot's chair. *Is she sleeping at all?*

"Hey, commander."

"Hey yourself."

The silence stretched out. She'd sometimes come up to the cockpit of the old Normandy for quiet, but this didn't feel the same. Too much tension for it to be companionable.

"Talk to me, Joker."

"Should I start reading off our engine performance stats or were you thinking of something specific?"

He heard her shift in the seat. "I need to know why you joined Cerberus."

He occupied himself running a report that he didn't actually need. "Told you. They let me fly."

"That was it? No worry about Kohaku, or all those people they killed through negligence?"

He answered brusquely. "I'm a simple guy, Commander."

"I need to know, Joker."

Shepard's "command voice" could stop a Krogan in it's tracks, but this wasn't it. She spoke softly, with a hint of desperation, and she sounded exhausted. It took him a long moment to respond.

"I was... I was in a really bad place. Made some stupid decisions. Got grounded. It started looking like Cerberus was the only option. And they were real persuasive."

He didn't like to think about that year. The endless psych evaluations from the alliance. The hints and half-explained offers. The seemingly inevitable choice between taking a gamble with Cerberus or a short walk off a tall apartment complex.

The figure in the copilot's seat didn't respond, but he could feel her eyes on him. He stared straight ahead, thankful for the anonymity offered by the darkened cockpit.

"After I'd been there awhile I kinda thought better of it. These guys killed a lotta people. I looked into bailing and getting back to Arcturus. They got wind of it and..."
"And?"

He glanced quickly back at her, but she was looking up at the blue flicker outside the Normandy's windows.

"And they told me what they were trying to do. With you. I didn't believe 'em. Even with pictures. Thought it was some freaky bad-guy psychology trick, y'know? I mean, if anyone's gonna figure out how to harness human angst as an energy source, it's gonna be Cerberus, right? But I figured I didn't lose anything by hanging around to find out. Just in case."

She sighed and seemed to relax into the chair. "I'm glad you did, Joker. Thanks."

"Yeah, me too, but don't go telling them that. Even if they make good chairs."

"You said you saw… pictures?" When he looked back she'd squeezed her eyes tight shut. "Nevermind. I don't want to know."

"No. You really, really don't."

He tried not to think about the Lazarus project. There were still nights he woke in a cold sweat, cursing Cerberus for ever showing him those holos. And talking to Miranda was already uncomfortable enough, without being reminded that she saw his commander as a science project.

"Two years..." Shepard mused. "Everyone's grown by two years but me. As far as I'm concerned, we were hunting Geth last week. I need to get my bearings." She yawned and stood up. "I've got a few more errands to run station-side tomorrow, but afterward I was going to ask Chakwas and Garrus up to my cabin for drinks. You'll come too, I hope? I've lost a lot of time, and I'd like to catch up."

_I'm not a people person..._

"Please?"

"Of course, commander. I'll be there. Just send me the time."
Chapter 2

It took awhile to feel comfy. Shepard had hardly been a social butterfly back on the old Normandy, so the whole idea of drinks in her cabin was odd — but the cabin was lux, and the beer was good, even if the commander seemed to drink far too much of it. Judging by the shot-glass on the table, she'd gotten warmed up before they arrived.

Joker took a moment to admire the little model of the Normandy SR1 hanging above the commander's desk, stroking her clean lines with one delicate finger. *That's my baby, my beautiful girl.*

Shepard noticed his attention and caught his eye, her expression unreadable, then she beckoned him down to the lower level. She sat between him and Garrus on the couch while they admired the cabin, stretching out her long legs and looking cool and collected despite the affects of the drink — or drinks — he suspected she'd already had.

Joker took a long look around the room and settled on the far wall, finally registering the blue glow for what it was. "A fish tank, really?" His eyebrows shot up under his hat.

Shepard shook her head. "I have no idea how Cerberus decides where to spend their money. Coin toss? Dice?"

Garrus chuckled. "Yeah, if they hadn't shelled out so much for you, we could *all* have fish tanks."

She nodded wisely and tapped her glass. "Clearly a much sounder strategic decision."

"Apparently they ran out of creds before they actually got to the 'fish' part."

"Yeah, the empty tank is a bit weird," Shepard agreed. "Don't know about buying 'em, though… Do they come with a manual? I've never had fish." She turned to Joker. "Have you?"

"Fried, deep-fried, sashimi…"

Chakwas laughed. "Oh, *really*, Jeff."

"Yeah, I had a goldfish or something when I was a kid. Biggest pet we were allowed on Arcturus. Used to try to bite my finger when I fed him. No where near as much water as *that.*" Joker nodded at the tank.

"Yeah, gotta keep the station-H2O clean," Garrus agreed, and told them about the fish-obsessed Krogan they'd met on the citadel that day.

Then the doctor asked Garrus about turian pets, and in turn shared a story about unusual pet-inflicted injuries that had them all laughing. The beer switched to brandy, and they reminisced about the SR1, now and again touching lightly on something that had happened in the two years Shepard had been dead. The conversation usually veered away quickly, since no one was quite sure how Shepard felt about that, but then someone mentioned Elysium and they were treated to a full-out rant about the "Shepard Memorial" there and its use as, of all things, a *wedding chapel.*

Shepard's voice got low and throaty when she went off on someone — unless she was addressing a crowd of screw-ups and she needed a parade-ground volume — and she gestured occasionally with her drink.
"You get better with practice, Shepard," Garrus quipped. He explained to the rest, "I heard the same tirade when she first learned about it on Omega, but the cursing is much more eloquent now."

Shepard laughed and threatened to start introducing him to krogan women via the extranet.

They were all more than a little drunk.

"Well, I always fancied myself a brave man... but even my courage has limits, Shepard."

"C'mon, you'd be the talk of Tuchanka, the turian who tried to kiss a missile."

"Well, at least I'll get good mileage out of it in bars." He turned his head to show off the brutal scarring.

"Yeah, no fair." Shepard grimaced. "I don't even have my own scars any more. Just these new ones." She scrunched up her lacerated cheek in illustration. "How the hell'm I supposed to brag about my past exploits if I can't prove it?" She scowled down at her side. "I don't even have the one from the X9."

Garrus leaned forward. "You know, commander, you never did tell us about how you picked that up."

_The TigerShark Incident_ was one of the great mysteries on the SR1.

Shepard had heard the off-duty crew comparing scars, a common pass-time of bored marines, and one-upped them all by claiming that her oldest battle scar was the result of a direct hit from one of the old fighters, a TigerShark X9. She'd pantomimed a gash across her abdomen a good six inches long and then calmly walked away, leaving everyone guessing. One of the female crew confirmed that she'd seen a scar there when they were in the showers, so old and faded it was barely visible.

They never got any more explanation from Shepard, though she'd mentioned it once or twice, in passing, and every time it set the rumor mill off again. Scuttlebutt had it that with the scar where it was, as old as it was, it must have involved a confidential mission during N7 training—or something even earlier.

_Not to mention near-disembowelment. Keep her talking, Garrus, this could be good._

The turian wasn't going to give up. "I didn't think your experience extended to piloting fighters. And no one's been using the X9 for years. Weren't they pre-contact models?"

The commander giggled, which was the most disconcerting thing in a disconcerting evening.

"Yeah, good ol' TigerShark. Short-range space and upper atmo. Wicked looking, too. Man, I loved that ship."

Joker shook his head. "Sorry, Commander. I've seen you helm the drop shuttle. Hell, I got motion sickness just watching the vid from the mako. You're not going to convince me you had a secret early career as a dog-fighter."

She feigned affront. "Never said I did! And Wrex drove the Mako."

"Sure, heard that one before." He nodded, disbelief written plain on his face.

She stuck her tongue out at him. _Shit, this evening gets weirder and weirder._

"Anyway," she said, leaning back on the couch with a bit of her normal cool, "I wasn't IN another
fighter. Never said I was."

He raised an eyebrow. "Hand to hand with a space fighter?" \textit{Pull the other one, it's got bells on it.}

Chakwas was being drawn in despite herself. "We all await with bated breath, commander."

"You really, really want to know?" Shepard took another swig and looked up at the starlight, eyes unfocused. Her voice took on the sing-song cadence of old veterans telling stories they'd told for the thousandth time. "Well, it was back in '59, I think, and…"

\textit{Wait, I was born in '55, and she's only a year or two older.} Joker could see that Chakwas, at least, had also done the mental math.

Shepard continued on, oblivious. "…and I was at the orphanage. There wasn't a lot to go around, and everything was old and cheap and second hand, y'know? My favorite toy was this beat-up TigerShark X9. Not a real model, just a tough plastic thing with all the decals applied in the wrong places. You could get 'em in the grocery store, they had the blue-and-orange packaging?" She looked at Joker as if for confirmation.

\textit{Why did she look at me? Okay, so blue and orange means it was probably a StarrFighterrs Lit'il Pilots line, but it's not like she could expect me to know that.}

When he didn't say anything, she continued. "God, I loved that ship. I hated letting anyone else have it, so I used to take it to bed with me so no one could steal it while I was sleeping. It was probably supposed to have rounded edges, but some toddler had chewed the right stabilizer off, and that plastic was sharp." She grinned nostalgically. "I fell out of bed one night and landed on it, and it tore right through my PJs. The aids said I screamed like a banshee. Wouldn't let 'em take the toy away while I got the stitches, either."

A moment of stunned silence followed that revelation. Garrus' jaw dropped, mandibles fluttering weekly. Then Joker couldn't contain himself.

"Shit, Sanders thought you'd almost lost your guts…" he couldn't get a full sentence out for laughter. "Some secret N7 crap, he said," he gasped for breath. "I told him you'd never been a pilot."

Chakwas and Garrus couldn't keep from laughing, seeing him lose it. Shepard's eyes were twinkling, and she looked as genuinely happy as he'd seen her since… well.

"S'not like I could actually tell them all what happened after I built it up like that. Would've ruined my mystique. And I don't want everyone thinking I accidentally hurt myself on sharp objects."

"Ha! More likely they'd think it's a pattern and assume you take a gun to bed now."

Shepard laughed, but Garrus looked confused.

"What's so odd about that?"

She sighed through her laughter. "Oh, Garrus, look at what living on the edge has done to you. Surely the \textit{Normandy} is safe enough that you can leave it by your bunk instead of under your pillow." She jerked her head toward her own pistol, laying on her bedside table instead of in an armory locker as required by Cerberus regs. "Those mercs came close enough to blowing out your Turian brains, I don't want you finishing the job by accident."

"I'll take it under advisement, Commander. I've been thinking that the rifle isn't as comfortable as
I'd like it to be." He rubbed his skull in mock complaint and cracked the turian version of a smile.

They kept up the light-hearted conversation for another half hour before Chakwas yawned, stretched, and begged they excuse her. Her face was glowing and her step a bit unsteady. Joker was planning to make his exit with the doctor when the turian stood up and offered her his arm. The last thing Joker wanted was to hobble back to crew-quarters behind the imposing, long-striding turian, so he settled back with his arms along the top of the couch as if he hadn't thought of leaving just yet.

Shepard thanked them for coming and waved them out the door, then collapsed next to Joker on the sofa, leaning her head back and rolling it till her neck cracked. "This was ni-ice. I'm glad you three are still here. Really."

"Ah, shit, Commander, don't get all sappy on me now just because you're lit. It'll look like a bad beer commercial when we replay the security vid."

"Nah," she leaned towards him conspiratorially, with the very deliberate movement of the drunk. "I stuffed the audio pick-ups over here with cotton, so all EDI gets is mmm-pphmm-mmph." She was close enough to look up under the brim of his hat. A wavering finger pointed at what he assumed was the offending microphone.

"Should have fixed her output, while you were at it."

Her head lolled and she collapsed gently against his shoulder. "Yeah… then she could go 'mmph mmph' too. Damn that AI…” her voice trailed off, and her head seemed heavier.

Don't tell me she's… he glanced down. Yeah, asleep. Shit. Now how'm I getting out of here?

He looked up at the stars, contemplating his options, while the Hero of the Skyllian Blitz started to softly snore.

Garrus could have picked her up and tucked her in bed like a baby. Jacob could do it with his brain. But no, she has to fall asleep on Jeff "fragile" Moreau, who has enough trouble moving his own sorry excuse for a body. He sighed heavily and looked down at his sleeping commander. He could call someone else up, but then they'd know that Shepard had been drunk enough to fall asleep on one of her subordinates... and that the subordinate in question wasn't equipped to handle it. And on the plus side, at least she is sleeping. And she has to shift eventually.

He stretched out his legs and tried to get comfortable. His arm had been extended too long, and the weight of her head on his shoulder was in danger of over-extending the joint, so he lifted it from the couch and flexed a few times to work the stiffness out, then let his hand hover indecisively between Shepard and sofa before awkwardly resting his arm around her shoulders.

Wow, her motor runs hot. Must be a biotic thing. He rested his arm lightly, carefully not getting too familiar with the muscled arm inside the uniform, but the warmth was unmistakable. The surgical scars on her cheek almost seemed to glow in the dim light, and he caught himself wondering whether their thin tracery continued around her body and down her long legs. No, don't think about that. That way lies madness. This is your commanding officer. Commanding Officers, as a rule, didn't have bodies. That's what he told himself if he ever was tempted to look at one.

But when he let his eyes close and block out the reality of his situation, he had to admit that it felt really nice. The simple pleasure of holding another human reminded him how long it'd been since he'd been touched for anything other than medical purposes. The warmth of her body and the feel of her steady breath brought home the realization that Shepard was really here, really back, really
alive, in a way that hearing her commands hadn't.

*She's alive. Your biggest failure isn't enough to keep her down forever.*

For a moment, he let himself rest his head on hers and soak in the feeling.

He felt the warm weight against his shoulder, his arm around her, der dark hair brushing his cheek. Her face was turned toward the starlight, brown skin bathed in soft stellar glow. It was strong and beautiful and unreal, seeing her so exposed. *It is unreal, you idiot. Just keep pretending that you're holding her because she likes you and not because she's dead drunk and you're the only warm body in the room.*

Her eyelids twitched, dreaming, and her head shifted against his side.

Then her eyes flicked open, and she screamed.

The next seconds were a blur. Her eyes were wide open and unseeing, and she thrashed. The first shudder pushed him back into the couch, then she twisted, arms flailing as if there was something on her back she needed to reach. Her scream became a whimper, "No, so cold, cold..." Her body seemed to torque of its own volition and he felt a white-hot crunch as her head hit his left arm.

Joker could scream quite well without making noise. He'd had practice. He let the pain wash over him for a few seconds, then marshaled his breathing. Shepard had fallen with her head and shoulders across his lap and her knees pulled up, almost fetal.

"Commander, can you hear me? Wake up!" He tried to hold her with his good arm without moving the injured one. "Rhi!"

The same soft starlight filled the room, but now it lit a nightmare.

Starlight.

He glanced from her eyes to the huge skylight. "EDI! Close the shutters for the Commander's quarters, now!" He had to shout to be heard through the damn cotton-stuffed pickup.

"There is no threat in the detectable vicinity, Mr. Moreau."

"Screw that, close 'em NOW!"

As the heavy shutters slid over the skylight her eyes finally closed. He cradled her as best he could. "Shepard, you're dreaming, wake up." He shook her.

Finally she blinked, and half-opened bleary eyes. "Cold," she murmured. "Alone and so cold..." Her hand made a fist in his shirt front and she pulled herself closer, head pressed against his chest. She was shivering. The pull of the fabric did deeply unpleasant things to his arm, and he had to take a moment to find his breathing again before he could talk.

"You're not alone, you're with me, it's Joker, we're safe on the Normandy. You're not alone." He spoke in a low voice, the same quiet reassurances over and over, holding her while her shaking subsided. The top of her head was wet with sweat.

*Oh, Rhi. "I thought..."* He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment. "You didn't die in the explosion, did you?"

The head-shake 'no' was almost undetectable. She still hadn't looked at him; hadn't even seemed to
register that it was him.

"You were spaced."

She whispered so quietly he could barely hear. "It was lonely. It took a long time."

Now it was his turn to shiver. "Have you dreamed it every night?"

"Don't know. Never remembered the dreams before, just waking up. I... I thought I didn't remember any of it. But my suit failed, I couldn't reach the break, the stars were all around. It was so cold..."

She made a visible effort to collect herself. When she sat up, she saw his arm, stretched out very carefully along the back of the couch.

"Shit." She met his eyes for the first time. "I hurt you."

Joker tried not to wince when she moved. "S'nothing."

She was visibly pulling the pieces of the Commander back around her, squaring her shoulders and crossing her arms. "Your arm's broken, that hurts like hell."

He took another long, measured breath, and gritted his teeth. "No, it hurts like a fractured radius."

"You can tell? Oh, Jeff..." She squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lower lip. "Damnit. I'm so, so sorry."

It was suddenly all too much. "Look, you need to sleep. Real sleep. And I should visit the doc. Go to bed, Commander. I'll see you in the morning." He tilted his head towards the closed skylight, "And remember that you can close the curtains, mkay?"

"Doc."

"Joker, what..." Chakwas stumbled blearily out of her tiny nook off the med bay and saw his cradled arm. "Oh, dear. How'd you manage this one?"

"I had help." He sat on an examining table. "After you left, the commander and I were talking and she fell asleep. Y'know how she never looks rested?"

"I've been concerned about that, yes."

"Turns out she has nightmares." He winced. "Violent ones."

Chakwas' eyebrows rose.

"She jerked around, spasmed, like she was reaching for her back, and her head slammed me in the arm."

She was feeling along the proffered limb with cool, clinical fingers. "Headbutt from an amped, out-of-control biotic, and only one bone broken? You're doing rather well."

"Thanks, that's something to keep me up-beat during the recovery weeks."

"Hold on." Chakwas knew he didn't like to be doped up just to have a bone set. She was quick
about it, and he let the pain out in one giant exhale. She started winding the plas-wrap on.

"Now, I know you're the injured party here, but –"

"But we want our fearless leader to be functioning on all drives the next time she takes us into certain doom? So she needs to deal with her nightmares, and you want to know what they're about."

The doctor activated the immobility matrix in the wrap, and he moved his arm.

"She's remembering her death."

Chakwas bit her lip. "Oh, dear."

"I thought, we all thought, that it was already too late when she was caught in the explosion, that it killed her. We were wrong, doc, wrong. She was spaced, and she remembers it. All of it. And those idiots at Cerberus," he was growling now, surprising himself with his own anger, "Put a giant \textit{window} right over her fucking \textit{bed}."
The next morning Shepard was all business, though the hints of a hangover were there if you knew to look.

The mission was a quick one, efficiently accomplished, and the debriefing was abrupt. So that's how we're going to play it. Just pretend it never happened, that you didn't get trashed and fall asleep in my arms, and I certainly wasn't rocking you like a baby. Fair enough. Probably for the best. Joker kept his attention zeroed in on his job, getting the bureaucratic make-work done at a pace even EDI had to approve of.

He was working on hypothetical evasive maneuver planning when a ping alerted him to a private message. He'd been so focused on the details of the contingency simulation that he almost jumped in his seat.

Need to talk. Port Observation, 19:00. - Shepard

He was fifteen minutes late.

Shepard was looking at the stars, hands splayed against the thick windows. He was relieved to see she wasn't drinking anything.

"Gardner'll be pissed if you get hand-prints on his windows, Commander."

She turned around and grinned. "Ever get the urge to smush your nose up against them like a kid at a toy store?"

"And now we add snot into the cleaning duties."

"As long as he doesn't add it to the cooking." She turned to look out again, and he let the silence deepen. When she spoke, he had to strain to hear.

"They're beautiful. I always thought so. Still do, when I'm awake. But when I'm half asleep..." She shook her head. "I didn't know why I couldn't sleep. I suppose I can remember it now because you interrupted the dream." All he could see was her silhouette against the stars, but her voice betrayed her anguish. "Shit, Joker, what kind of starship commander is afraid of space?"

"Well, I never met anyone who really wanted to just hang out in vacuum, you know. We all try to avoid it."

"You know what I mean." She turned back to face him, irritated.

He was worried and confused and his arm hurt. "Yeah, sure, I know what you mean. You mean that you've always been preternaturally fit and capable, and you've never had to cope with weakness at this level in your entire life." He leaned back against the bulkhead and spread his hands wide in a shrug. "Be thankful it took you this long to develop a good neurosis. Some of us came with our issues pre-installed."

For an instant she looked cold, and he was afraid he'd pushed too far. His mind's eye replayed pictures of her haunted and weak the night before, shivering and clinging to him, and he wished...
fervently that he could have held her instead of giving her a verbal slap in the face. But her shields were up, an almost palpable wall protecting her personal space and her precious self-control. He could recognize that. He had the same. *Does she even remember that she clung to me last night? Or is it all mixed up in the nightmare?*

She slumped backwards against the glass and sighed.

"You're right, aren't you? Time to be a big girl and deal with it." It was hard to tell in the dimness, but he thought her lips twitched in the ghost of a smile. "Don't look so tense, if I'd wanted cheerful psychologist pablum I would've talked to Kelly."

"Yeah, how come she never harasses you?"

He pitched his voice higher and fluttered his eyelashes. "Mr. Moreau, I think you would really benefit from joining in this team-building activity. Mr. Moreau, I think we should spend some time together. Mr. Moreau, it appears you may have some deep-seated trust issues." His voice dropped back to it's normal register. "How DO you manage to avoid it?"

Shepard laughed. "I learned early on that if you tell the shrink you don't want counseling they can't get enough of you. Tell her what she wants to hear. I keep it nice and positive around Kelly. Every time you're talking, imagine those fluffy bunnies you mention so often."

"I probably shouldn't imagine eating them, should I?"

"Probably wouldn't work so well. And speaking of Kelly, I'd prefer this not go any farther than you and I."

He used his 'you wound me' voice. "I'm not exactly the ship gossip, Commander. But you should consider telling the doc."

She sighed. "I'll talk to Chakwas. But for shit's sake, don't tell Miranda."

"I never tell Miranda anything if I can help it."

"Good policy." She nodded to his arm. "I'm really sorry about that. And Joker? Thanks. For being there."

She turned to look out at the stars, and he went to go find dinner.

—

He lay awake late that night.

*I failed her. I watched her end and couldn't do anything. It was my fault. The explosions tore her apart.*

It was a line he'd repeated often, sometimes in his own head, sometimes in a dead voice at a mandated therapy session.

The first two alliance shrinks had passed him off as unhelpful and unwilling to participate in his own treatment.

The third had labeled him unstable, with dangerously inverted priorities, more obsessed with the destruction of a ship than the death of his commander.

He didn't bother to correct him. What did it matter which 'her' he was talking about?
They were inseparable in his mind, anyway. If he'd been able to save his baby, he'd have been able to save Shepard. That was his job. He made the Normandy dance for her. She handled the bad guys on the ground, and he kept her safe in the black. He'd been invincible at her helm, until she was torn apart around him, and he knew that without her he couldn't save her, that he was only useless, broken Jeff again, watching flaming debris and a vanishing body from the window of an escape pod.

These thoughts had old, worn pathways in his head. But now there were new images, something to cling to as he lay awake. The memory of sleeping weight and biotic heat, of Shepard lying peacefully on his shoulder aboard a new Normandy. She'd been sleep deprived and drunk, and he didn't delude himself that she'd have chosen to leave herself so exposed to him sober, but... in the end, maybe it didn't matter. He'd been there, and so he'd helped.

Thanks to him, Shepard could start to face her nightmares.

And he hadn't needed the Normandy to do it.

Joker had to be careful of his arm for a few days, during which they left the Citadel and started on a round-about way to their rendezvous with the prison station Purgatory, where they were picking up some con the Illusive Man seemed to think would make a valuable addition to the team. Shepard asked for a circuitous route and made half a dozen practice planet-drops with various combinations of her ground team, testing their abilities dirt-side as the flight-crew ran drills on the Normandy.

The crew accepted the circuitous route for the belated shake-down it obviously was. Miranda was irritated, but that was nothing new.

After five days Chakwas cleared Joker to start bone-building exercise. He relinquished his station on-time for once and headed to the makeshift gym that had been set up in the hangar.

He had the place to himself as he ran through the familiar series of isometrics, keeping his hand in a loose fist so he didn't apply any sideways force to the fractured bone. The wrap Chakwas had applied took the excess pressure and held everything in place. With older tech he'd have had to wait weeks and lose a lot more muscle tone.

He was grabbing free-weights and setting up to work his good arm when Shepard walked in, holding a water bottle and towel. She smiled at him, dropped her things, and started warming up.

He returned the greeting and then tried to pretend she wasn't there. It worked pretty well until she got warm enough that she stripped off the top of her shipsuit, leaving her in a black tank-top and fatigues.

The surgical scars did continue down the rest of her body.

She'd turned her back on him to put her folded shirt on a crate, and he could see one red line on either side of her spine. When she turned, he saw another set coming from the point of her shoulder, curving under her collarbone, and vanishing into the neck of her tank-top.

You couldn't miss them. They glowed in the dim light of the hangar. Each scar was a thin line of red-orange light, in stark contrast to the brown skin around them.

He hoped Shepard hadn't notice his stare.
She jumped to grab the chin-up bar, lines of muscle showing under her smooth skin.

"I never could stand weights," she said as she pulled herself up, "I get bored."

"The one good thing about crutches is decent arm strength. I'm not gonna let that slip just because I don't need 'em anymore." He adjusted the strap that kept him from torquing the bone. Normally he'd use his other arm, but, well.

"Makes sense." There was a break as she did another chin up. "So did Cerberus," chin-up, "give you some," chin-up, "fancy tech, too?"

He shook his head. "Fancy? Nah. Surgical procedure's been around for ever. Brutal, basic twentieth-century medicine. Intramedullary rods. Supportive metal down the middle of the bone."

Shepard lowered herself to the ground. "So why didn't you have 'em before?"

He shrugged. "Docs didn't want to do it before I hit my full growth, and by the time they were sure of that, I was in the academy fast-tracked to fly. Didn't want to take a break and risk missing my chance."

She shook her head and smiled. "Joker, you are one dedicated son of a bitch."

As compliments went it wasn't exactly smooth, but the warmth and respect in her voice were genuine.

He bent his head over his exercises so she couldn't see the color in his face. "Hey now, Commander, back-seat driving aside, my mom wasn't so bad."

"Oops. Sorry." She switched to crunches. "Well, I'm glad to know I'm not the only one on board who's bionic."

"Compared to the magic Cerberus put in you? I'm not even a steam-powered automaton. You're the freakin' geth."

She stopped, grinning, arms crossed on her knees. "When my cyborg brethren and I take over the world, I'll see we reserve a place of respect for our venerable elders."

"I for one welcome our new cyborg overlords." A thought occurred to him. "Wait, elder? I'm younger than you."

"Are not."

"Your birth-date's in your public file, y'know."

She grimaced. "The two years on the table don't count."

"Well, I suppose it's a more creative excuse than 'I won't turn thirty unless I get a party.'"

"It's legit!"

"I didn't ask Miranda about the details, but I'm pretty sure you weren't actually, er, dead, the whole time."

"I don't like to count the time I was alive, either. That'd mean I'd have to think about it."

"Oh, so I can stop counting any time I've spent under anesthesia, then? That should de-age me a
few days at least."

She looked from him to the bright scars running along her chest.

*Shit. I think she did notice me staring.*

"It's different, somehow, knowing someone else did all this and I wasn't aware, than it is earning them in a fight." Her voice was quiet.

"Yeah, it is."

She looked surprised, as if she hadn't expected him to agree with her.

*Well, you are the guy who told her to man-up a few days ago.*

"It seems stupid, I keep thinking that 'this was done to me', even though it saved my life." She snorted. "Never had a problem taking bullets."

He wanted to say something snarky and flee, but he was starting to realize this was territory he knew better than she did. *I can't hold her and make it all right, but I can at least talk to her.*

"It's not stupid, it's just human." He tried to think how to frame it. "A lot of people, after a real illness or major surgery, feel like... like their body isn't theirs. It's really common — I, er people do all kind of things to reclaim themselves." He lifted a weight in his good hand. "Intense exercise, for one. The most scary-muscled guys I ever met were people I knew from the hospital, and that includes you marine freaks."

She paused. "I thought I came down here just to work myself until I could actually sleep tonight. We'll hit Purgatory tomorrow and I want to be awake. But... there might be more to it."

He nodded. She'd been running herself to exhaustion on her drills.

"Exercise is one way. People do other things. Tattoos. Piercings."

She looked at him, searchingly, a shadow of the hunted expression he'd seen in her cabin.

"Does it help?"

"I never went in for piercings." He couldn't meet her eyes, so he let his close. "But, yes. Yes, it all helps. Anything you do to your body to make it yours again." *And I hope this helps you, because I just ripped all the armor off my tormented inner teenager to say it.* Shit. Just when you thought you'd dealt with all your ancient psychological crap, you unpeeled a new layer.

He started putting away the equipment he'd used. He'd given about as much as he could stand, and he needed out.

Shepard watched him in silence, sitting with her arms wrapped round her knees. As he turned to leave an idea struck her. She sat up straighter and her eyes lit up.

"Joker, does that mean you went in for tattoos?"

He tossed off a salute and stepped into the elevator. "See ya, Commander."

———

The mess was near full when Joker arrived. He would have preferred privacy, but he was starving
and craving a painkiller or three, and they'd sit better on a full stomach. He grabbed a tray and a
seat near the end of a table and bent over his meal, thankful that his cap gave him a good excuse
not to make eye-contact.

It didn't stop him from eavesdropping, though. *Hey, everyone needs some dinner entertainment.*

With no new info on their enemy, the conversation had turned to Shepard. They were still trying to
figure her out. Like any crew with a new CO, but with the added interest of a double-helping of
heroism and being the risen dead.

You could pick out who was eager to be seen as *her* crew because they already shortened her name
to 'Shep', which they'd never do in her hearing. It was harder to tell the outright hero-worshipers
from the people who just had a stick up their ass – both used full name-and-rank every time. *If they
knew her serial number they'd tack that on, too.*

He remembered a similar conversation with Kaidan, as the SR1 left Arcturus. The hadn't even met
their new XO yet outside of a quick introductory briefing, and the tech in the copilot's seat was full
of nerves at serving under both Anderson *and* the Hero of the Skyllian Blitz.

"Dude, aren't you a big tough space marine yourself?" Joker had said. "Why've they got you so
intimidated?"

"Are you kidding? These are N7s! Seh-ven. You don't get more bad-ass than that. They could wipe
the floor with me. Don't tell me they don't intimidate the crap out of you."

Joker snorted derisively. "Kaidan, if I was intimidated by everyone who could beat me to a pulp, I
wouldn't get out of bed in the morning. People who are more physically bad-ass than me are, let
me see, hmm, *everyone*. I kinda stopped counting after awhile."

"I admire your cool, man. Not, y'know, anything else about you, but that, sure."

Their banter had been interrupted by the relay jump and the turian spectre, and then XO Shepard
had walked quietly up behind them while he made some crack about leaving his fly unzipped.

He'd had worse first meetings with superior officers.

It had taken him awhile to get a fix on Shepard. First there was that whole hectic shit storm of a
supposed shakedown run, then there was the fact that she seemed to have a deeper well of self-
control than anyone he'd ever met. He liked pushing buttons; he was good at it. But her buttons
were damn hard to push. He might have made the mistake of thinking her an alliance robot, a
Perfect Soldier, except that the Perfect Soldier type was usually way too easy to piss off.

Sometimes, when he was being a particular ass, he'd catch the barest hint of a smile. Eventually
he'd flown them out of that volcano on Therum, and while he was griping about medals she'd given
him one of those sidelong glances and pointed out that ceremonies were boring and he'd have to
shave, and it was suddenly clear that she'd been in on the joke the whole time.

What it *hadn't* taken him long to realize was that Shepard was good at her job. Both on the ground
and on the bridge, she was always beautifully competent. Not in an over-the-top, dramatic genius
kind of way. But when something needed dealing with, she dealt with it, and did it well.

The only time he'd ever heard her talk about the Skyllian Blitz, she'd said she'd done the job that
was in front of her, day after day after day.

Joker appreciated people who did their jobs well. He was one himself.
His reverie was interrupted by the woman next to him, a fresh-faced kid named... Hotchkins? Shit. The gossiping crew had finally noticed that someone who knew Shepard was sitting right next to them.

If she'd been someone he'd hated, he might have enjoyed the opportunity to get a few digs in, but it was her, so what could he say? 'She's amazingly competent' wasn't going to cut it. 'I killed her, now she has nightmares' would be worse.

He was saved when Shepard herself walked into the mess, clean and in full shipsuit again after her workout, Cerberus black-and-white hiding the ruby of Cerberus scars. She took a biotic helping from Gardner, and there was a shuffle down the table as they rearranged themselves to give her room.

He tried to see what they would, a new CO who was half legend, but it was hard not to see the Shepard he'd worked with seamlessly through hell and back, the Shepard who'd joked with him not an hour ago about her cyborg invasion.

She was still the Shepard who'd scared the shit out of Kaidan, though. She could be fiendishly hard to read, and they hadn't learned her vocabulary yet.

Even he couldn't see the signs of the Shepard who'd shivered in his arms. Who didn't quite feel that her body was hers. That person might as well be someone completely different.

She sat down, greeting the crew next to her by name (she remembered, of course), and the conversation that had died when she entered turned to the innocuous topic of food.

Joker finished and was gathering his tray to leave when he heard Ken-from-Engineering shout from the far end of the table, "But he still can't cook a haggis!"

"Always about the haggis." Daniels rolled her eyes. "I'd rather eat rat."

"I ate a rat once." Shepard looked thoughtful. "It's probably healthier to stick to haggis unless you know where the rat's been."

The commander did an excellent job of appearing not to notice the silence that rippled down the table as eight heads turned to stare at her. She kept calmly eating.

Joker walked away, chuckling to himself. Total reserve, a bit of sly humor, and that dash of mystery. Give her a week and they'd follow her to hell.

And the next time someone asked him what he knew about the Commander, he'd tell them he heard she had a run in with a TigerShark X9... but of course, he didn't know the details.

Chapter End Notes

Intramedullary rod fixation is a current treatment for Osteogenesis Imperfecta (Vrolik's syndrome), though I made the whole 'wait for adult growth' thing up to cover for canon. I'm seriously disappointed in 22nd century orthopedic medicine.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Purgatory was going to hell around them.

*Heavenly.*

*Ha.*

Shepard crouched behind a crate, letting her over-worked shields recharge. The air reeked of burning plastic and ozone from the YMIR mech they'd taken down. The station rang with shouts and gunfire, all distant for the moment. Through the din the damned automated security message kept playing, over, and over, and over.

“Nothing’s ever easy,” Garrus grumbled.

“What, you didn’t expect the guy abusing prisoners in a for-profit mega-jail to betray us? Come on.” She risked a glance around the crate. “Two up, 10 o’clock. Cover me.”

She was still for half a breath, letting power suffice her, surround her, lift her to her toes.

Then she charged.

She closed the distance to the first merc in an eye-blink, slamming the stunned turian in the chest, her unleashed mass effect field flinging him against the wall like a toy. She’d spun around and emptied her clip into his partner before his body had time to slide to the floor.

She flattened herself against the wall and caught her breath, finding her calm center under the surge of battle energy, the wicked joy that pervaded her.

She had a long list of problems with Cerberus, but the new implant wasn’t on it.

A third merc appeared around the corner, but Garrus took him in the head before the merc realized his danger. She used the moment to bolt to the corner, pistol at the ready for whatever came around it… but there was no one there.

“We're clear!”

Grunt bellowed an affirmative from the other side of the room. They regrouped and tore into the corridor just in time to see a slim tattooed figure burst into the hall, a prison guard hot on her heels.

*Jack.* The prisoner they were supposed to buy from this slime pit.

Shepard calmly took aim over the fugitive's shoulder and fired. The merc dropped like a stone.

*Gotcha.*

Jack didn't say thank you. Her eyes had caught the Cerberus emblem on Shepard's shoulder, and she radiated hate. Now her rage was an almost palpable wall, all aimed at Shepard. Or rather, her uniform.

*I'm supposed to recruit someone with a violent hatred of all things Cerberus? That would have been a useful tidbit to include in the dossier.*
Shepard kept her gaze glued to Jack's face. Even her skull was tattooed. A question nagged at her, totally irrelevant.

*Does Joker really have tattoos?*

Joker cursed as he lost the connection to the shore party again.

*First the easy pick-up changed into a station-destroying fire fight 'cause some idiot tried to pull a fast one on Shepard, then the 'recruit' she picks up is a half-naked hate-machine with even crazier mental powers than the other biotic wizards, then the Illusive Man sends us on a collector hunt with no notice and a half-trained crew. Where we lose track of the ground team.*

*This day just keeps getting better and better.*

He tried the radio again. No luck. “You getting anything I'm not, EDI?”

“No. The collector vessel is causing disruptions in the planet's atmosphere that interfere with our transmissions.”

“Yeah, I'd about figured that out.” Their audio contact with Shepard's team was intermittent, and forget video. *What the hell is going on down there?*

The *Normandy* was in geo-synch orbit on the far side of Horizon from the colony center. *Hoping that hiding behind a planet will work, when all our stealth tech doesn't. Crap.* He had orders to cut and run if the *Normandy* became a target, but he was praying to all the gods he didn't believe in that he didn't have to make that decision. *We are not leaving them down there.*

The feed crackled to life again in time for him to hear Shepard's muffled curse and the rattle of SMG fire. *Swearing is good. Seriously injured people don't swear.*

Mordin chimed in from the tech lab. “Still vocal! Good. Swarm prevention functional.” The salarian muttered something too low to make out, then added, “Need more data. Should be down there. Frustrating.”

Joker rolled his eyes. He was relieved that the commander had left Mordin behind. He'd had nightmares about Shepard being taken because her salarian back-up was distracted by a brilliant scientific discovery entirely unrelated to the mission at hand. The scientist was far safer on the ship. *Even if he does threaten to experiment on us when he gets bored.*

“Relax, Mordin. When we were still in contact they were scanning everything in sight, all for you. Now cut out. Some of us are trying to focus, here.”

He fiddled uselessly with the radio controls again. There was a whole ship full of collectors down there, and Shepard only had a small team. *Okay, all the times I said I'd be happier not knowing exactly what was going on with the ground team? I was an idiot.*

His relief when Shepard's voice came in over the transmitter was short lived. The team had reached the colony's defensive guns, but they didn't have the time or the code knowledge to get them back operational.

“Stay close. EDI'll hack through.”

“Roger.”
“Come on, EDI, get those guns up…” He could hear the sound of bullets, now, and that hideous groan he remembered as husks – zombies, he'd called 'em – but he still had no video.

The guns were taking their sweet time recharging, and EDI warned the ground team of another wave, and then another. He heard the whistle of heavy fire, and then Shepard's voice; a short, wordless moan. *Shit shit SHIT. Come on, swear for me. Let me know it's okay.*

She didn't, but after a moment her labored breathing slowed and he heard the blast of her shotgun.

“Come on, EDI!”

---

Shepard stalked off to her cabin, pictures of the Illusive Man's self-satisfied mug flashing in her mind. *The bastard set us all up. Half the colony is gone because he didn't want to wait.* She wanted to punch something, but she was on doc's orders to rest and let the medi-gel work its magic. *Like I could rest right now.*

The door whispered open on the eerie quiet of her quarters and she flung herself into the station chair, rattling out a frustrated beat on her desk with her fingers. There was nowhere to rest her eyes that didn't scream *Cerberus*; the cabin had nothing that she had not acquired since her… resurrection. She glared at the fittings indiscriminately. Empty fish tank. Empty picture frame. Sound system, might as well be empty.

*I need music. Real, hard, brain-clearing music.*

*I need something that's mine.*

She turned to her terminal. She was a crap hacker, but with her command overrides she didn't need to be good. In a few seconds she'd called up the personal storage files of her crew. It would be a breach of privacy to look at their personal data, of course, but she wasn't after their secrets—just their music collections. Just enough tracks to hold her over until they reached a comm buoy and she could start rebuilding her own library—which had been fucking vast, and had probably all been wiped by now.

The list that scrolled by in response to her search query did nothing to quell her irritation, though it did redirect it.

A bunch of pop crap that had come out since her death.

Hours and hours of the same electronic beat that filled the bars on Omega.

A complete collection of Gilbert & Sullivan (in multiple languages).

Old earth western classical, Hanar spirituals, that asari crooner, uncountable identical whiny pop groups… *Damn. Doesn’t anyone listen to anything worthwhile anymore?* Finally she hit something reasonable; an old earth rock number she recognized.

“EDI, whose file is this?” She'd left the mic on the desk un-sabotaged, after making sure it was highly directional.

“You are currently inappropriately investigating the music collection of Helmsman Jeff Moreau, Commander.”

“Joker? You’re kidding. I thought he bitched about old radio-bubble stuff.”
“I am not equipped to judge musical tastes, but based on an analysis of meta-data, his musical interests span multiple genres and at least one hundred seventy-five years.”

*Jackpot.*

“EDI, show me the contents of Joker’s media collection. No, no, wait!” She held up a hand. “I only want audio. Filter it.” *Not looking for that kind of entertainment right now.*

The screen filled, and filled again. She began to suspect Joker listened to music the entire time he was flying. Without any repeats. For months. EDI wasn’t exaggerating about the breadth of his musical interest, either. *I wonder if she’s even capable of exaggeration?* Rhi couldn’t begin to recognize half of the titles. She wasn't even sure about some of the *genres.* There was a lot of jazz and variations thereof, which she mostly passed over, but some of the rest was more up her alley.

“If you are planning on continuing this unethical behavior you may also wish to examine Engineer Donnelly's preferences,” EDI said. “Judging by your current selections.”

“Sure, pull it up.”

Shepard reloaded the cabin sound-system with hard earth rock, metal from three planets, and an album by a ret-rock-nu-punk group she’d seen in a warehouse when she was fifteen and stoned out of her mind. Then she lay on the deck, head mid-way between the two speakers, and *cranked* it.

She lay spread-eagle on the floor, staring up. The vibrations surged through the deck matting, bass thumping in her sternum like an amplifier of her heart, lifting her up, sweeping her away. The painkiller Chakwas had given her started to wear off, and the burn in her thigh pulsed in time with the beat. Screaming guitars carried her impotent rage out to the stars.

It was too loud to hear herself think.

It was perfect.

Once the music started making the wall-plating rattle, it stopped feeling quite so much like a Cerberus cabin.

An hour later her catharsis had finally run its course. She turned the volume down slowly and peeled herself off the floor. Fifteen minutes later she crawled into bed, sure that this time she would sleep.

It was no use. Even with the echo of the music thrumming in her head, she couldn't stop her restless thoughts. The memory of cathartic music became noise, clamoring in her skull. The exhaustion of the hard fight on Horizon was countered by the pulse in her leg, the wound that she shouldn't have taken. Wouldn't have taken, two years ago, when her body was all hers.

She remembered her talk with Joker in the gym. “*Anything you do to your body to make it yours again. Yes, it all helps.*”

There'd been such weight to his words, like dragging them into the open had taken an act of strength.

Somehow she didn't think piercings and medigel-dispensing armor would play well together. She'd already sat through Chakwas tsk-ing about how the wonder-goo stitched the wrong parts together. *And sat through being torn open again so she could stitch them up right.* But what else was she supposed to do? She'd known a few women who dyed their hair whenever they were dumped, but she'd always though it was silly. She could let Kasumi give her a make-over until she looked like a
total twit. The idea was almost ridiculous enough to make her laugh. *Or scream. What a horrific thought.*

*Damn it, I just want to feel like me again.* It sounded unbelievably whiny, even in the privacy of her own skull. *You've got collectors out there stealing colonists and a boss who's probably a terrorist. Your little identity problem is pathetic.*

*Joker didn't seem to think so.*

Joker.

She'd forgotten to give Joker their new heading.

She rolled out of bed, pulled her shirt back on, and went to correct her oversight. If he had any sense Joker would be asleep by now, but Mercer would be at the helm, and there was no sense sitting idle.

She doubted she'd sleep soon, anyway.

———

Joker had remained at the helm long after they were safely out of Horizon's space, turning his relief pilot away with a glare.

He usually waited until the bridge was quiet before he left the cockpit, anyway. He felt like an exhibit on display, limping back to the elevator through the crowded CIC. Granted, it was better now than it had been when he was reliant on crutches, but old habits of mind died hard. *I wouldn't have minded if they'd shortened that bit for the SR2.*

Even so, he should have gone to bed hours ago. There was only a half-watch on duty in the CIC, and he needed sleep. He vaguely remembered Shepard say as much as she walked by, but he'd ignored her, and she'd been so damn pissed at their Cerberus puppet master he doubted she'd remember.

Instead he watched while the *Normandy* drifted in the black.

He didn't like to admit how much the sight of the collector vessel had rattled him. He couldn't shake the idea that it was on their tail, and he wasn't going to leave his ship a sitting duck. If that thing showed up, he'd be ready.

He sat up, startled, when he heard footsteps behind him.

“Hey, you’re off duty. I’m going to go poke around the mess. Could use some company.” Shepard jerked her head toward the elevator, half order, half invitation.

He eyed the long walk to the elevator. Shepard’s constant, barely contained energy made him feel even slower than he actually was. *Does she really have to jog everywhere?* The only time he’d ever walked *anywhere* with her had been at the Cerberus station, right after the Illusive Man had revealed that she was awake. To be fair, it hadn’t felt the like he was holding her back then, but she had been recently *dead* at the time. She’d be a lot fitter now.

His undead commander quirked her eyebrow at him when he didn’t immediately get up. “EDI, send Mercer up here, and let her know we’re headed for the far rim. Dholen system, but I want her to hold off on making the last relay jump until the first shift crew is awake and ready to go. We’re headed to Geth space.”
Joker scowled at her. “Shouldn’t you be catching some sleep?”

“Was. For awhile. Come on.”

He slowly unfolded. No chair was meant to be sat in for upwards of eleven hours, no matter how well designed, as every muscle in his body was keen on reminding him. He took several wincing steps, hand out for balance, before he was able to straighten up and approximate a normal stride. He refused to look at Shepard, afraid to see pity on her face. He limped towards the elevator, expecting to fall behind her long stride.

She was dawdling, keeping pace with him.

“You don’t have to slow down for me, Commander.” He couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice. She’d forced him into this.

“I’m not.” She sounded startled, and he really looked at her for the first time since she’d shown up. Her skin color made it harder to see the circles under her eyes, but they were there. Her uniform looked slept in, and she was moving so stiffly she might have been seventy. Or me. And here I am being defensive about it.

The reached the elevator and leaned against opposite walls. He groped for a subject of conversation to fill the awkward silence. Horizon. “What happened down there?”

“After the general collector mayhem?” She gestured vaguely. “There was this big, hideous, thing.”

He snorted. “Descriptive.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’d draw you a picture, but I don’t think my stick figures would convey the full effect. Pull it off the helmet cam.” She winced. “Husks again, too. Remember those?”

“Wish I didn’t.”

“You’re tellin’ me.” She reached down as if to rub the side of her leg, but stopped herself. “Husks overwhelmed my shields and I took a shot in the leg. Shattered the armor. Medigel patched it, and then the doc had to unpatch it again and patch it again right.” She shook her head and grimaced. “Stupid, stupid mistake. My response time isn’t what I’m used to. Think I can blame Cerberus?” She poked her own arm. “Maybe the body’s built wrong.”

“Yeah, I say that all the time.”

Her face fell. “Shit, Joker, I’m sorry. I can’t keep my foot out of my mouth, can I?”

“Aw, Commander, if you start worrying that I’ll say something snarky, you’ll never get anything done.”

The elevator reached the crew deck. Shepard collapsed in a chair in the empty mess. Her shoulders were slumped, her usual grace undercut by fatigue.

“Y’know, you look awful.”

She snorted. “Flattery will get you nowhere. A beer, however…”

He debated whether that was really a good idea while he tapped in the code — technically known only to Shepard and Miranda—that unlocked the ship’s small supply of alcohol. He certainly wasn’t going to be the one to say she shouldn’t drink. Anyway, given her astounding tolerance a
single beer hardly counted, and she probably had stronger stuff in her quarters.

“Your wish is my command.” He tossed her the cold bottle underhand.

She caught it neatly and opened it on the edge of the table. “Good to know, since my commands are apparently only suggestions.”

“What? I always listen! To you, anyway. Mostly.”

“I’m pretty sure I told you to knock off hours ago. The *Normandy* needs a pilot who’s rested.”

“I could say the same about her commander. You didn’t used to be of the ‘do as I say, not as I do’ school of leadership.”

Her eyes widened at the rebuke. “Yeah, she probably could. Can't seem to manage it, though.”

He snagged a bottle for himself and grabbed a seat across from her, ripping the cover off the cup noodle to activate the heat element.

“Does closing the shutters help?” Halfway through asking the question he felt extremely awkward. Neither of them had mentioned that night since their talk in the observation deck.

She must have felt it, too, because she stared at the beer in her hand instead of meeting his eyes. “Yeah. A bit. A lot, really. Now it's the *getting* to sleep that's the hard part. Worrying about the reapers, worrying about collectors, trying to figure out the Illusive Man's game,” she cracked a half-hearted grin, “dreaming up new ways to piss off Alenko…”

He'd known his old buddy was on Horizon, but he hadn't heard their conversation. “What do you mean? Alenko wasn't happy to see you?”

“Happy? I'm Cerberus, a terrorist, a traitor. He's not sure if I went rogue or I'm some kind of evil clone. You can guess at the rest of the conversation.” She sighed. “Doesn’t help that he was never quite easy with me after I shot him down back when we were hunting Saren. Apparently I wasn’t as gentle as I thought.”

“Ouch.” *Holy shit, dude, I knew you were into her, but I didn't realize you were dumb enough to make a pass at your commanding officer.* “Didn’t mean to pry into your love life.”

She chuckled. “My lack-of-love life, you mean? Going from busy and on a military vessel to *dead* for two years doesn’t leave lots of opportunity.”

“What about Li-ar-ra?” He said it in an obnoxious sing-song, and was surprised when Shepard put her head in her hands and growled.

“Argh, no! I was *never involved* with Liara. Why the hell do people think that?”

“You're all-hearing, all-knowing pilot thought differently. What about that ‘special moment’ you two were sharing at the citadel?”

He wouldn’t have thought a flush would show through her skin tone, but it did; a very slight darkening of her cheeks, almost imperceptible in the dimmed light. *Learn something new every day.*

“Fuck, no. Liara's a bit too blue and female and, well, *Liara*, for me. Damn, I am *so* glad you interrupted when you did. I was a mess. I’d have kissed Wrex if he showed up to pull me out of
that funk.”

“That… would have made an impression.”

“Yeah, the council would love it, wouldn't they? First Shepard followed visions. Now she's kissing krogan.” She barked a laugh. “Then she shows up when she's supposed to be dead. I wonder if I could say anything to get them to trust me less, at this point. Fairies wear boots, and you’ve got to believe me?”

It took a minute for the song reference to click in his head, and then he blinked in surprise. *Fairies wear boots...* he racked his memory for another line from the song. “It might work. But d’you really want the council to claim that smoking and tripping is all that you do?”

She raised her hands in mock defense. “Hey, I've barely touched hard drugs since I was seventeen.”

Perfect Alliance Soldier, indeed. His surprise must have shown on his face; she gave him an impish grin. “Aww, sheltered Arcturus boy.”

“Careful, Commander. You don't want to sound like Jack.”

“Oh, Jack, Jack.” Shepard leaned back in her chair and lobbed her empty bottle into the bin by the galley. “You know she keeps telling me she ran with a gang, like I'm supposed to be impressed? Gangs, yeah, whoop-di-fuckin-doo.” She shook her head. “When I first saw her, it reminded me of what you said about ink. I don't think it's workin' out so well for her.” Her voice grew thoughtful. “Maybe because she's not doing it for herself. Jack's tats are more a giant 'fuck you' to the world.”

“I haven't exactly tried to get close to her or anything, Commander, 'cause I like to stay in one piece and all, but I get the impression just about everything Jack does is a giant fuck-you to the world.”

She snorted. “For someone who says they're not a people person, you seem to hit the nail on the head a fair bit.”

He shrugged, uncomfortable, and finished his dinner.

“Anyway,” Shepard said, “she has her reasons. Cerberus really put her through the wringer. Doesn't make her easier to deal with, though.” She yawned and got up. “Thanks for the company, Joker. Guess I better go tackle that sleep thing again—in the morning I need to write Anderson and try to convince him about the fairies.”

He looked up at her with narrowed eyes. “I can’t believe you know that song. The most recent cover has to be thirty years old.”

She did that half-grin thing again. “Yeah, well… I kinda 'borrowed' the original from your files a few hours ago. Cerberus neglected to restore my music collection.”

His jaw dropped. *What have I got in those files? Did I leave anything embarrassing unencrypted? Shit!*

Shepard interrupted before he could blurt out anything stupid. “Whoa, whoa. I didn't so much as peek at anything but music, I swear. Cross my heart, hope to die. Again. EDI'll back me up. She was very disapproving of the whole process.”

“You could have just asked.”

She had the grace to look slightly ashamed. “Yeah, probably. I wasn't in a talking-to-people mood.
And I had no idea who on the ship would have something I could stand. But I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry.”

He couldn't even start to be angry while she was giving him that sheepish look. It was totally unfair. He rolled his eyes at her and sighed in mock-defeat. “Don't worry about it, Commander. I'm just glad you can take out your anger with metal instead of giving us all KP or biotic-punching-bag-duty or something.”

“I'm reserving the last for the Illusive Man himself. Don't tell him; it's a surprise.”

“Ha! Sleep well, Commander.”

“G'night, Joker.”

Chapter End Notes

"Fairies Wear Boots" is by Black Sabbath. Rhi also listens to Queen.
Joker watched the shuttle settle safely into the *Normandy*’s bay through the vid feed. It disgorged four figures—Grunt, Garrus, the Commander, and a quarian who he had to assume was Tali. He saw Garrus clap the her on the back. The commander handed her helmet to a waiting ensign, then gave the quarian a hug that lifted her off the ground.

Definitely Tali.

*Well, that was worth coming all the way out into geth space for, at least.*

Joker grinned as he guided the *Normandy* out of orbit. Unlike the rest of Shepard's piece-meal squad, Tali had her head on straight. She’d been out on more missions than any of the other SR1 crew; Tali and Wrex had been Shepard’s go-to team. Hopefully, having her old friend back would ease the tension the commander still carried.

Also, she’d made his baby run like no other engineer ever had.

“It appears the newest recruit is the cause of some celebration on the part of your old shipmates,” EDI intoned.

“Well, yeah, it’s Tali. They’ve been through it all together. She was with the commander when they took down Saren. And she better remember to come up here and say ‘Hi.’”

He started a mental countdown. Unless someone was injured, Shepard took twenty minutes from landing until she visited him on the bridge, presumably using the time to sluice off, since she didn’t show up spattered with gore. Usually. He couldn’t quite set ship’s time by it, but it was a near thing.

30 minutes after the shuttle touched down, he heard two sets of footsteps approaching. *She’s late. Must have been making introductions.* She took extra care to make sure the alien recruits met every member of the Cerberus crew. Probably afraid that a pro-human fanatic would shoot them on accident.

*Or maybe she just likes showing off her collection.* She certainly was good at collecting people, and they always seemed to end up happy to have been collected. *Like me. I kill her once, become a complete wreck, and have to go to work for the bad guys just so I can be part of the collection again.* The thought would have been bitter a month ago; now it made him oddly cheerful.

*I’ll have to tell my internal monologue that using the term ‘collector’ under the current circumstances is just tacky, though.*

He spun his chair around.

“Joker! I’m glad to see you.”

“Tali! That is you in there, isn’t it?”

The quarian laughed. “Oh, stop it, you know it’s me.”

Shepard was smiling, an easy relaxed grin.

“It’s good to have you back.”
Shepard agreed. “It is, though I wish it were under better circumstances.”

Joker snorted. “What better circumstances are we ever in? If you want to ditch this whole universe-saving thing and plan an assault on a deserted sunny beach with fancy drinks, I'm in. I'll bring the little paper umbrellas.”

She shot him a Look. “I meant better circumstances for Tali, but your strategic input is noted.”

Oh, yeah, those circumstances. He gave Tali an apologetic look. “I'm sorry about your team. I wish we'd gotten there sooner.”

A three-fingered hand settled on his shoulder. “I'm just glad you came at all.”

“Can't resist a damsel in distress. Hey, now you're here you gonna show those two kooks in engineering how it's done?”

Shepard was reassuring. “You shouldn't have any trouble with the engineering crew—they're more alliance than Cerberus. Why don't you take some time to get settled? I'd like to talk more later, if you don't mind.”

“Of course, Shepard.”

“My cabin, then? Good.”

“See ya, Commander, Tali.”

They nodded and headed off, Tali for the elevator, Shepard for the CIC, where she perused the galaxy map and exchanged a few words with Chambers.

Joker brought up his omnitool and pinged Tali. Same old address, good.

Hey Tal. Don't let her drink too much during your girl-talk. -J

The reply came almost immediately.

!? -T

She had an expressive way with punctuation, you had to give her that.

It's been rough. -J

Roger. -T

A light on the HUD flashed, alerting him that Shepard had picked their destination.

Joker scowled when he read the coordinates, craned over his shoulder so he could see Shepard, and thumbed the mic.

“Pragia? Is that where you meant to head?”

Across the length of the command deck, he could just see her lean on the rail of the star map and look his direction. He couldn’t make out her expression, but it probably included at least one raised eyebrow.

“Doing a favor for Jack. There’s something she needs to blow up.” He heard a note of amusement in her voice.
“Commander, I like gratuitous explosions as well as the next guy, assuming the next guy isn't Grunt, but didn’t we have something we were supposed to be doing? I seem to remember these collector-things…”

“And a minute ago you were all set for a beach. I was going to take you up on that.”

“I have a total spacer tan. I'm so white I'd blind people. It's not a good idea.”

“But I'd get to see your mysterious tattoos.”

“Sooy… Pragia, huh? What's the deal?”

“It’s only a jump away. And at the moment I’ve got a dangerous criminal biotic squatting in the hold spending all her energy hating everything Cerberus, whose uniform I happen to be wearing. I thought we’d all sleep better at night if she’s gotten the big explosion out of her system for awhile.” She pitched her voice so only the mic on her uniform collar would catch it, “Besides, I’m hoping that if she thinks she owes me she won’t flip out if I ask her to put on a damn shirt.”

“And thaaat’s the mark of the true murderous madwoman. When you’re nice to her so she’ll put a shirt on. Plotting course, commander.”

Rhi stood up from her desk as Tali entered her quarters, and they met in the middle of the floor, gripping each other's arms. She couldn't say how she knew that the quarian was returning her warm smile, but she did.

"I missed you."

It would be pointless, now, to explain how hurt she’d been when Tali hadn't joined her on Freedom's Progress. She had always been good at putting the past behind her. What else could you do, really?

On the shuttle ride away from the colony she'd been beset by a host of ills which Miranda attributed to the cybernetic implants adjusting to her new level of activity. Sitting between two Cerberus operatives with blurry vision and a blinding headache, the quarians' talk of Cerberus sabotage echoing in her skull, she'd thought that Tali had made the right choice.

"I wanted to come with you then, truly." The quarian bowed her head. "Now, I wish I had."

Rhi pulled her into a hug, the soft folds of Tali's cowl brushing her cheek. "You did what you thought needed to be done. That's all we can ever do, Tali."

"But all those people, my people, dead, for what?! Some abstract data on a dying star."

She held Tali's shoulders, pushing her to arm's length so the quarian could look into her eyes. "If you hadn't led the mission, they would have sent someone else, and the geth still would have attacked. It's no use dwelling on what-ifs."

"Well, I suppose you would know…” She shook her head. "Were you… were you really dead, Shepard?"

Rhi nodded. "Come, sit down, I'll explain what I can. Not that I was in a position to know much…”

She told her about Cerberus and their desire to stop the Collectors. She told her about the new
Normandy, the few old crew and the greater number of Cerberus unknowns. She included the details that Miranda had let slip about the process of bringing her back, and about the giant composite monster she'd fought on Horizon.

And she found herself telling more, things she hadn't breathed a word of to anyone.

The cold terror of waking up naked on the Lazarus table, with only a disembodied voice and the sound of gunfire for company, no idea where she was, her last memory shoving Joker into an escape pod.

The shock when she learned that she had been gone, dead, for two years. Like the ground dropping out from beneath her, her center falling away. How in that moment she wished she'd never been brought back.

Her anger and guilt, whenever she thought of Miranda and Cerberus. Guilt and anger for working with people she knew to be ruthless, even evil; anger at their high-handedness in bringing her back. Guilt that she was angry, when she should be thanking them for her life.

That the first night she'd slept, on the Cerberus station, she'd woken convinced that her flesh was sloughing off her bones like an old zombie flick, that the processes of decay that Cerberus had denied would catch up to her all at once.

Tali listened through it all, and closed her three-fingered hand around Shepard's when her voice got rough.

It poured out, cathartic, until there was nothing more to tell. Shame welled up in her at her total loss of self-control, and she hid her face in her hands.

“Oh, shit, Tali, I'm sorry,” she took a deep, shuddering breath. “I didn't mean to lay that all on you.”

“It's alright, Shepard.” The quarian shifted closer, hand on hers. “I can't imagine… it must have been awful. It's okay to let it out.”

Rhi shook her head. “It was selfish of me. You have your own worries.”

“What?! Shepard, how many times have I told you about my personal problems? My pilgrimage, my father...” She shook her head. “It's your turn. I'm happy to be here.”

“But... I can't. I can't let anyone see this. They're scared enough already. They need me to be strong.”

“You will be when you have to.” She squeezed her hand. “You always are. Letting go, once in awhile, that's just... that shows you're still... oh.” She looked uncomfortable. “I was going to say 'that just shows you're still quarian', but, er...”

Tali's sudden awkwardness broke through Rhi's tension, laughter spilling out from the places all the hurt and confusion had been. “Oh, damn, the other day I came this close to telling Garrus that he made errors because he was 'only human'.” She giggled. “I think we need some new idioms.”

The two women met each others' eyes and dissolved into laughter, mirth that washed away pain and left the cabin feeling warmer.

“So. What next?”
“Right. Next. We're on our way to Pragia. Jack—she's the tattooed super-biotic lurking underneath engineering—grew up there. As a test subject.” She scowled. “It's a Cerberus base, or was. It should be empty, now. We plant a bomb, give Jack a little symbolic closure, and incidentally, pick up any extra dirt on Cerberus we can find. After that… I'm still deciding.”

“If this Jack is so unstable, will you be safe?”

“I have to find out sooner or later, or she's just a dangerous waste of space.” Shepard saw the question in the angle of Tali's head. “I need you here to look at the engines. All of the engines. I want to know if there's anything there that isn't in our schematics. I'll take Garrus down to Pragia. He'll have instructions to take her out if things start to go bad.”

Tactically, the trip to Pragia was a resounding success. Whether it would do anything to help Jack remained to be seen.

When Shepard walked up to the cockpit Joker greeted her with a flippant “Heeey, Commander, how was therapy?”

“I think we may need more bombs.”

“That good, huh?”

“Were you following what we found through the helmet-cam?”

He whistled. “Yeah, that was some messed up shit.”

She leaned against the wall as Garrus tromped up behind them.

“I ran into Miranda on the way up.” His mandibles flicked in anger. “She insists that the facility chose it's methodology without the knowledge of Cerberus high-command.”

“But with their credits, hmm?” Shepard snorted in disbelief. “Is Jack back in her hole? We can't have her running into Miranda right now.”

“Yeah, I heard her cussing when I stopped by engineering to talk to Tali.” He looked thoughtful. “Do you think there's any chance that it was a rogue operation?”

"Imagine it was. That would mean that even the Puppet Master himself doesn't have a handle on what 'his' people are doing. From where I'm standing, it looks like they're trying to tell us they're not evil, just incompetent."

Garrus cracked a wry turian smile. "I don't think it's an either/or thing. They could well be both."

"That's not reassuring. Thinking about Cerberus incompetence makes me worry that I'll wake up and find some of my bits have fallen off."

Joker looked around, worried. “C'mon, Commander. Even a stopped clock is right twice a day, yeah? They seem to have done a decent job with the Normandy. You're the other success!”

“Joker, do I have to remind you that we run on military time? Our stopped clock is only right once.”

“Ooh, right.” He shook his head. “Sorry, Commander. You're hosed.”
It worked: she laughed. He kept his smile to himself.

Garrus shook his head. “Let's go get something to eat, Shepard. I hate discussing terrorism on an empty stomach.”

Joker put on an exasperated voice. “Thanks, man. A guy just can't get any quiet, y'know? Some of us have work to do.”

Shepard raised one eyebrow at him.

“Hey, sometimes I have to push a button! It takes all of my concentration.”

“Careful, Joker. Don't strain yourself,” Shepard chuckled, and the two left for the mess.

They were still discussing Cerberus when the elevator reached the crew deck.

“Miranda and Jacob, my two watchdogs. I wonder where the third head is?” Shepard's eyes flicked towards EDI's console. Before Garrus could respond Mordin appeared at the door to life support and destroyed all semblance of privacy.

The salarian fell in with them as they turned into the mess, where Gardner was filling trays with something that looked suspiciously like food.

“Knowledge of ancient earth mythology. Surprising. Would not have guessed from history. Unstable childhood, lack of formal education, intense military focus. Lied about age in attempt to gain entrance into Alliance academy. Background in classics… unexpected.”

She glared at him.

“Curious about commander; did not wish to disturb important mission. Hacked confidential file. Will avoid in future.”

They slid into seats, nodding greetings to the crew already there. Daniels and Donnelly, Joker's 'kooks in engineering'; Patel; Mathews. Mercer, scheduled for the next shift at the helm, was tucking into breakfast rather than dinner. And they'd probably all heard Mordin's succinct rundown of Shepard's life story.

She gave a resigned sigh. “Mordin, have you ever heard of privacy? No, don’t answer that.”

“Acknowledged. Still curious re: literature.”

Gardner slid her a tray and she took a bite, making Mordin's curiosity wait until she'd finished chewing.

“I assume you’re aware of the alliance DSE Initiative?” She pitched her voice to be heard by everyone at the table. If it was story-time, she was going to do it right.

“Deep Space Exploratory. Manned missions of discovery into areas uncovered by relays. Wasteful and discontinued.”

“That’s the one. Five people in a tiny ship for months. We called ‘em the hairy palm expeditions.”

The servicemen and marines she'd served with wouldn't have batted an eyelash, but the partially civilian crew looked shocked to hear their commander mention something so crude. Her lips
twisted in a half-grin.

“Don’t look so surprised, you all grow up in a convent?” She shook her head. “Anyway, I shipped on one of the last ones. Don’t really know why—figure I pissed someone off. Short haul; only gone four months, which was long enough to realize the nickname had some truth to it.”

“Commander, respectfully suggest that you, perhaps, do not understand idea of ‘privacy.’” Mordin’s translator must have had a really good slang dictionary.

“Mordin, you better be damn good, because I’m starting to wish I’d left you on Omega.”

“Have heard similar sentiments before, Commander.”

“Anyway, when I say the ship is tiny, I mean it—if you weren’t asleep, you knew what was going on, ’cause it was going on ten inches away. And it turned out the captain on this mission liked hanar.” She chuckled. “Liked hanar.”

“We used music, vids, books, anything so we didn’t have to pay attention to our CO getting his rocks off to xenoporn. I swear, I read every bit of media that vessel had been loaded with, a lot of it twice. It’s the only mission I’ve ever been on where everyone aboard actually read all the equipment safety manuals.”

She sat back and scanned her audience. Mordin was single-mindedly attacking his food, his question answered. Garrus was chuckling, and Donnelly looked like she’d given him a birthday present.

The rest of the them didn't know whether it was okay to laugh or not.

It was the Cerberus distrust. In the alliance there was little separating marines and navy, everyone knew where they stood, and camaraderie was the norm. This crew had been thrown together from a variety of backgrounds by an organization that intentionally kept the right hand ignorant of what the left hand was doing. *Hmph. In the military we just did that by accident. Most of the time. I think.*

Donnelly leaned in from the other end of the table. “And who was this commander, can ye tell us?”

Gabby, the constant better-half, covered her ears. “No, Ken, I don’t want to know.”

Shepard raised one eyebrow and shot Ken a quelling look. “That’d be some kind of breach of privacy, I’m sure.”

“Ha! Sounds like ‘is privacy was pretty breached already, ma’am. Come on, can't ye see I’m dyin' of curiosity down here?”

She smiled faintly into her water. “Engineer Donnelly, I’m surprised at you. I thought you had more respect for the honorable institutions of the Alliance than to expect me to impugn,” she coughed around the name, unsubtly, “Captain Otari.”

“Captain O…” Ken’s eyes got gratifyingly big before he lost it and spit his drink across the table. Apparently he’d known of the man.

Rhi looked at the sheer variety of expressions around the table—shocked, embarrassed, gleeful, and laughing-so-hard-he’d-swallowed-the-wrong-way-and-may-be-dying, and finally let out the grin she’d been holding the entire conversation.
Mordin shook his head. “Will never understand species with constant sexual drive. Inefficient. Wasteful.”

“you wanted to know where I found time to read, Mordin.” Shepard leaned back in her chair. “Y’know, the first time I actually met a hanar was on the Citadel after the attack on Eden Prime?” She wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. “That may have been the most awkward five minutes of my life.”

Shepard gave one of her junior crew the most awkward five minutes of their life less than an hour later.

Not ready to sleep, she'd decided to work on Mordin’s latest blast of collector data. Mordin wrote almost like he spoke, and if he remembered that he was writing for a marine and not a fellow scientist he certainly didn’t show it. The subject matter wasn’t something you wanted to read without a lot of reassuring, live human voices around, either. She couldn't focus in the quiet of her cabin; she was too used to crowded ships and the constant bustle of crew.

She shoved the datapad in her thigh pocket and went down to the crew deck, stopping off in the empty mess to heat two mugs of hot chocolate.

Chakwas looked up as the med-bay doors opened.

“I’ve been studying this stuff from Mordin and I need a change of scenery.” Shepard lifted one mug. “I brought bribes.” The doctor couldn’t resist chocolate.

“Any time, Commander.” The doctor gratefully accepted the steaming mug. “Mmm… more goodies from the Citadel, I assume? Make yourself at home.”

Rhi snagged a chair, claimed an out-of-the-way corner by the AI core, and settled down to read. With the small sounds of Chakwas at her terminal and the muted chatter of crew on break outside her wandering mind was finally able to settle on the task at hand.

She was deep in the Normandy’s data banks, finding the definition of another important-yet-obscure scientific term Mordin had neglected to explain, when the door slid open. She kept on with her reading, but kept half an ear out in case the issue was a personal one and she should leave.

“Can I help you, Mercer?”

“I hope so, doc. I’m just a mess, lately. I wanted to be on this mission, but I’m stressed. It’s urgent, then it’s not, now we’re flying around in circles, and everyone thinks we’re going to die…”

Shepard shifted, loudly, so that the junior pilot would know she was there.

“Can I help you, Mercer?”

“I hope so, doc. I’m just a mess, lately. I wanted to be on this mission, but I’m stressed. It’s urgent, then it’s not, now we’re flying around in circles, and everyone thinks we’re going to die…”

Shepard shifted, loudly, so that the junior pilot would know she was there.

“Can I help you, Mercer?”

“It’s okay to be nervous, Mercer, I’m not going to think any less of you for it.” Shepard leaned forward across the table, using her body language to enforce that this was a casual conversation. “Waiting is always the hardest part. It’d be easier to charge in without a clue. But all this waiting, all the side trips… it’s prep, Mercer, and we’ll all be stronger for it. We’re taking our time for a reason. When it comes down to the wire we won’t die.”

“Yes, Commander.”
“You don’t have to agree with me. I’ll be right whether you do or not.” Rhi smiled. "How long have you been with Cerberus?"

“Just, just over a year…”

“And you weren’t any kind of military before. Look, things are still twitchy, now. People haven’t worked out their places. Give it some time, and it will start to be a real team. Not just the ass-kicking squad, the flight crew too.” She detested the distrustful nature all the Cerberus operatives ended up with, and hated that it seeped down to their crew. My ship will not be like that. “Now, I’ll get out of your way so you can talk with the doc.” She started to gather up her things.

“No, really, it’s okay, Commander. You, uh, heard what I was going to tell her anyway.”

“If you’re sure… it's no trouble to leave.” At Mercer's assurance she settled back into her chair and returned to the datapad, half-aware of Chakwas calmly giving advice on making connections with fellow crew and getting enough exercise.

“It’s important to take care of yourself, especially on missions such as this, dear. I expect to have to chide the marines about it, one always has to, but you'll be more sensible, yes? Good. Now, one other thing. I’m sure you're already prepared, but just in case, have a glance over this datapad and mark anything you want.”

Rhi looked up at the young woman’s shocked gasp and raised one eyebrow in Chakwas’ direction. The doctor shrugged, a small, amused smile on her face. “Don’t worry, it won’t show up on the Cerberus expense account… in any form you’d recognize. I’m very discreet.”

“But, but, doctor,” Mercer choked out. “This, these…”


The pilot shot a terrified, embarrassed look at her commander. “You act like this is normal!”

Rhi shook her head, fairly certain now what the doctor had offered. The relief pilot was competent, certainly – not as good as Joker, but that was an impossible standard – but she seemed so damn young.

“It is normal, Mercer,” she said. “You from one of those pocket religious colonies or something?” The Alliance tried to keep their official colonization efforts balanced in terms of politics and religion; polarization and isolation were a dangerous mix. But extremists always found a way, and no one really kept track of what went on out in the Terminus systems.

“But – at dinner, you were laughing at –“

“Someone who didn't have the sense to keep their personal needs private? Yup. Big difference between shitting in the head and on the mess hall table.”

“What a mental picture you paint,” Chakwas said faintly.

Mercer was even redder than before. “No, it’s… Commander, no one else is… I mean, maybe the guys, but…”

Chakwas eyes twinkled. “Maybe the men? Ha.”

Shepard barked a laugh. “Oh, kid, everyone ‘is’. You’re on a ship in space with a small crew;
relationships are complicated even when they’re not expressly forbidden, and everyone’s more than a bit anxious. When they’re not anxious, they’re bored. That’s military normal.” Paramilitary. Terrorists. Whatever. “Back in the marines I never could figure out why they didn’t just issue ’em in alliance blue with your ship-suit. It’d save everyone a lot of hassle. Looks like Cerberus isn’t any more enlightened, in that.”

Chakwas met her eye with a long suffering look. “It is run by a man.”

“Blessed by nature with slightly less dependence on batteries,” Shepard agreed.

Mercer’s appalled expression was a thing of beauty. Rhi wished she had a camera. Instead she made a show of shifting her attention back to her reading, to save the pilot further embarrassment.

The junior pilot exchanged a few more flustered words with Chakwas, then fled the sickbay. The doctor murmured “So sheltered…” as the door shut behind her. Shepard shook her head in rueful agreement, then glanced up.

“Hey, doc? Don’t put that pad away. Seems my entire kit went down with the first Normandy.”

Chakwas tossed it in her direction and they both bent back to their work.
"Nos Astra control to *Normandy*. Relaying your approach vector."

"Vector received."

"Approach path is clear. Welcome to Illium."

The SR2 was a bigger ship than the original *Normandy* and slower to respond in atmo. Joker missed the older vessel's impressive maneuverability, but the larger size did make it more impressive when they slipped between the glittering towers of Nos Astra.

Shepard, watching over his shoulder, gave a low whistle.

"Shiny, isn't it?"

"No kidding. See how the other point-oh-oh-one percent lives."

"Gonna tell me what we're doing here?"

"Two more of the Illusive Man's hand-picked head-cases to pick up. With any luck they'll be more stable than Jack and the krogan. Oh, and looking for fish."

"Fish? I thought you'd decided that was a frivolous expenditure."

"I had. Then Garrus reminded me that it's the Illusive Man's credit chit, and suddenly fish sounded really appealing."

"Ah, embezzlement for fun and profit!" Joker grinned as he eased the *Normandy* into her berth. "How you gonna write that one on the expense sheet?"

"Haven't decided. Chakwas'll come up with something. The woman's fucking brilliant at line-item obfuscation."

His "What?" was drowned out by the hiss-thud of the docking clamps.

"*Normandy*, we have you secure. Nice flying."

"Don't sound so surprised, Nos Astra. You ain't seen nothin' yet."

There was a grumbled "humans!" from the other end of the radio as the comm link was cut.

"Joker." Shepard chided, gently.

"Okay, okay. What's this about the doc?"

"You've served with her longer than I have. You didn't know she's a creative genius with paperwork?"

"I thought she only broke her perfect facade to drink new recruits under the table. She never mentioned getting contraband through requisitions."
Shepard snorted. "She knows you too well."

"I wouldn't have abused it! Much."

"Yeah, sure." Shepard shook her head. "Want anything on Illium?"

"Yeah, actually. Three pairs of socks, better coffee, and an asari stripper. If it's not too much trouble." He twisted his head around to try to catch her reaction, but all he got was the twitch of a half-grin, quickly contained.

"Hmph. Better bring the krogan to carry my shopping bags, then." She shook her head at him. "All the footage of asari dancers I've picked up isn't enough? I always make sure to get decent vid for you when I'm in a club."

"What? Wait, all that asari-ogling was on purpose? I thought you just… um…"

She chuckled. "No, I don't 'um'. But I seem to remember you expressing and interest, and I wouldn't want you to miss out on all the fun just because you're stuck here. So I point my helmet in their direction occasionally."

He processed that for a minute. He'd always figured they just shared an interest, what with Liara and all… but Shepard had sworn she wasn't into Liara, that evening after Horizon. And the oldest of the helmet-cam shots dated back to…

"Wait a minute. You've been doing that since we visited the Citadel! Since we visited the Citadel two years ago."

"Yup!" She grinned. "Never let it be said I don't take care of my crew."

That's… really odd. What's a little exotic dance vid between friends, right? She brought back brandy for Chakwas, and teasing me with the action in Afterlife while I'm shipbound fits her sense of humor.

The Illusive Man had warned Rhi that Liara was on Illium.

It would have been nice to know that Liara was the one who recovered her body.

It would have been good sense to let her know that the Collectors had wanted it too.

'Nice' and 'good' did not appear to be in the Cerberus vocabulary.

The whole meeting had started out awkwardly; Liara had looked like she was going to try to kiss her, but Rhi backed away. Rebuffed, the asari jumped right to business… and her business had gotten a bit darker than digging for dusty prothean artifacts.

Shepard didn't like to admit how queasy hearing about the recovery of her corpse made her. *Corpse. Dead. Shouldn't be here. Just another object to be recovered.* She took it out on her old shipmate, along with her frustration that Liara's help tracking down the recruits came with strings attached. *Just like everyone else. Should've pretended I'd fallen for those blue puppy-dog eyes.* Rhi'd sworn at Liara, told her she'd done wrong by giving her body to Cerberus.

She regretted her words even as she was storming out of Liara's office.

It was Liara's fault she was stuck working for Cerberus, but if the asari hadn't turned her body over...
to the Illusive Man, she'd be part of some gruesome Collector experiment right now. Liara had made the right choice, but Rhi was still pissed.

*Looks like staying decently dead was never really an option.*

Realizing she'd been destined to be someone's pawn only intensified her desire for a drink. Hadn't she seen a bar at the other end of the trade floor?

Tali and Garrus followed her up the steps to Eternity without a word. She strode into the lounge with eyes only for the bar, and walked right into the middle of an… altercation.

*That's it. The fucking universe is fucking fucking me. Fuck it sideways.*

She didn't realize she'd said it out loud until she heard Joker's voice in her earpiece.

"Uh, Commander…?"

So she added "With a fucking plasma arc," for his benefit, put on her game face, and went to chat with Conrad Verner.

Shepard was still simmering when she got back to the *Normandy* and gave the crew eight hours of shore-leave.

"Sorry, Joker. The only stripper I saw was booked. Salarian bachelor party."

He stared at her. "Does that even make any sense?"

"No, but it is actually true. Aren't you going to go play outside?" She waggled a hand towards the airlock.

"Illium looks a bit polished for me. I'm afraid I'd break something."

"Part of yourself, or part of Illium?"

"Either is too expensive for me to replace. Those you-break-it-you-bought-it policies are killer."

The last of the crew left the airlock, and Shepard slid down the wall until she was sitting on the deck plating. "What a fucking day. Never thought I'd run into Verner again."

"Yeah, Commander, that was really… uh… wow."

She shook her head. "I know. I'm starting to think I didn't do the right thing."

"You shot him in the foot!"

"And I regret it!" She sighed. "Kneeing him in the balls would have been much more satisfying. Or maybe it wouldn't have. Never accept a command position, Joker. These decisions haunt you for years."

"See, Commander, that's the kind of talk that makes guys intimidated around you. That and the shooting-people-in-the-foot."

"If he'd kept on as he was he would have gotten himself hurt worse." She hid her face in her knees
and raked her fingers through her hair, messing up the neat bun. "I don't feel intimidating at the moment."

He looked at her, long legs curled up into an unhappy ball of Shepard, arms wrapped around her knees. "Honestly? I was thinking you looked like you could use a teddy bear. But then I remembered that you prefer to cuddle spaceships."

Her reply was muffled. "I should never have told you that story."

"Probably not. You were pretty lit at the time."

She turned her head sideways to look at him, cheek resting on her knee. "You talked to Tali, didn't you?"

The quarian had intervened at the bar to steer Shepard away from the hard liquor. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't give me that crap. She had no reason to stop me unless one of you talked to her, and Garrus wouldn't say no if I asked him to jump off the tower, poor sod."

"Chakwas?"

"Patient confidentiality."

Well, she hadn't become the first human spectre by being an idiot. "I, uh…"

"Relax, Joker. I'm not gonna give you hell for it." Shepard closed her eyes, and her voice softened. "I know you're right, anyway." She looked at him again, pulling out a tired smile. "It's nice to know you're looking out for me. Thanks."

_I wish you would look out for you._ He wanted her to be strong. It scared him to see her like this… and he didn't know how to respond to that thank you.

_Change of subject time._ "What's the plan tonight?"

"Interrupt an assassination attempt. Or possibly abet one. Not quite sure how it's going to go down."

"Are we ever?"

"You have a point." She stood and stretched. "I better try to catch some sleep before the party."

He nodded. "Better do that myself."

"You don't have to be awake. The _Normandy's_ not moving for another day, at least. I've got another recruit to look up, and some ship upgrades to look into. And I still haven't bought fish. Sleep this one out."

"Yeah, yeah, you say that now, but just wait until you've somehow managed to blow up and/or set fire to the building that you're in, _again_, and have to wait while I down a pot of coffee before I come to your rescue. You'd be singing a different tune then, Commander."

"I'm not planning on breaking Illium. It's expensive, remember?"
Joker sipped a giant mug of hot coffee as he made his way up to the helm. He'd slept well for the odd hour; it was nice to have the crew quarters to himself while the crew was at liberty. He'd woken up refreshed and ready to monitor the night-time mission.

Shepard, Garrus, and Tali were suiting up by the airlock. Well, Tali came pre-suited, but Shepard was still attaching ceramic. Her armor glinted a deep dark blue, details picked out in yellow-orange. He had to admit it suited her better than harsh Cerberus black and white. Did she choose alliance blue on purpose?

The shore party went through the ritual of checking each other's gear with the ease of long practice. As Joker passed them, Shepard's hand snaked out and neatly snatched his coffee cup. She grinned at him and took a giant swig, then made a face and handed it back.

"Shit, Joker, it's poisoned!"

Garrus looked over, disturbed. "Poison?"

"If you're going to use sugar, you should use cream too. As a warning to others."

"Teach you to steal a man's coffee. In some systems that's a killin' crime." Joker slid into his chair and ran the checks on the suit-and-helmet cams.

"I tell ya, you're going to be bored stiff sitting there."

"I'll do a crossword."

"Is that what they're calling it now?"

"Ha." He waggled his fingers goodbye as they entered the airlock. "Have fun storming the castle!"

As it turned out, Shepard was right – he could have stayed in bed. Watching a mission while the Normandy was in berth did give him the opportunity to kick back, though. He dialed up music for his earpiece, then swung his chair sideways, feet up on the rail around EDI's projection, idly watching the monitors to his right.

The AI hated it when he did that, but that was the point.

The partially constructed office building Shepard & Co. were clearing was crawling with mercs, who in turn were crawling for the exits as soon as they spotted the group from the Normandy.

Whether it was just time, or the effect of having Tali back and a team she trusted, Shepard seemed to have rediscovered her old fluidity. Also, that biotic charge thing was hella impressive. He'd switched to watching Garrus's vid as his primary just because the quick location jump was so disorienting, which was why he was seeing Shepard instead of what she saw.

*It sounds like a plausible excuse, anyway. A lot more rational than admitting she's beautiful in action.*

Come to that, Garrus really kept a hawk's eye on the Commander. Of course, cover fire was his job.

There was a time, fresh out of flight school, when Joker had hated marines. Seeing how fit they were, hearing them boast about injuries, the way they showed off their stupid scars whenever they thought someone impressionable might be watching. He'd been disgusted that someone lucky enough to have a perfect body would so arrogantly, foolishly risk it. *Don't they know what they*
He still felt that way about professional athletes, but he'd learned respect for the jarheads. They weren't throwing away their health; they were sacrificing it for damn good reasons, and if some of them sounded like the arrogant jocks in school, well, they usually grew out of it or didn't last long. Now, he could watch Shepard cut through a battlefield and feel only the simple pleasure of seeing someone who was very, very good at what she did.

When they cornered a merc and started talking instead of shooting, he turned off the music. He'd been trying to give the fight a sound-track, but Shepard's team was really uncooperative. *I'll have to talk to them about keeping the gunfire more rhythmic.*

The commander was threatening, digging for information. The unlucky merc stood in front of a plate-glass window with a gorgeous view of the Nos Astra skyline. Plate-glass… Shepard took a step forward, and Joker had a brutal intuition of what was about to happen. *We've all watched the same action vids.*

He thumbed Shepard's comm-link and murmured, "We weren't going to break Illium, Commander. Remember? It's *expensive.*"

She stopped, pinned the merc with a glare, and switched to persuasion. "Surely, a little information isn't worth dying over… "

The next morning they were one lizard-assassin richer, Illium was one corrupt asari oligarch poorer, and Joker still hadn't managed to fit the fight footage to any of the music in his copious collection.

*Oh well, another project for some really boring orbit.*

Shepard headed out again, and returned with two different kinds of fish, plans for a gun upgrade, and an asari justicar.

They trooped through the airlock and Shepard detailed Miranda to help the asari get settled.

Tali started giggling as soon as the operative and her charge were out of earshot. "Were you watching? Did you see Shepard tip the volus? Keelah, we were in the middle of a firefight and I couldn't stop laughing!"

Chambers had been looking over his shoulder when that particular scene had played out, and now she approached them, face full of earnest sympathy.

"That poor volus. It's really not funny. He was drugged!"

"Really, Chambers, it's not funny?" Joker pulled up the vid data from all three suits and rolled it back. Watching the little guy stagger from three angles was better than one. When Shepard's hand reached out to tip him over, the entire shore party lost it again. "Admit it. It's funny."

"It saved his life, Chambers," Shepard said, seriously. Then she grinned. *And, it was fucking funny.*

The yeoman sighed in defeat. "I just don't think it's kind to take such joy in his mental trauma."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Forget kindness," she raised her arms up, and blue light coursed along her
body, "I am a biotic god!"

Garrus reached over idly and shoved her shoulder, and the commander obligingly rocked back on her heels. Tali was laughing so hard she had to hold onto the wall to stand up.

Miranda's voice interrupted their mirth. "Justicar Samara is in the port observation lounge. She's ready whenever you want to take her round for introductions, Commander."

"Roger, Miranda, I'll be down in a few minutes. Thank you for your help."

"So, what about this Samara, hmm?" Joker hadn't read the dossier, and the conversations he'd heard had been strange. *Amazing figure for a woman old enough to be your distant evolutionary ancestor, though.*

"Powerful biotic, rigid adherence to some ancient code, the definition of black-and-white morality. I'm thinking of trading her in for the bartender at Eternity."

"Sounds like a good trade. That bartender was pretty kick-ass. Did you remember your receipt?"

"Damn, no, and that oath sounded pretty non-refundable."

He mimicked Chambers' voice, "Where *do* you shop?" Aping the yeoman made his pride hurt, so he dropped it. "Seriously, are all the weird ones in the bargain bin or something?"

She shrugged and gave a sheepish half smile. "I couldn't afford anything else after I spent the Illusive Man's credits on fish." She held up two bulging plastic bags. "Want to name one?"

"I'll think about it. That's a serious responsibility."

"Not really, you can't tell 'em apart any way."

"So you say, but just ask it's mother."

"How will I know which one she is?"

"Oh, god, call Chambers, I don't think I can take any more of this piscine insensitivity." He put a dramatic hand to his forehead and rolled his eyes heaven-ward.

She chuckled. "I'll bring you smelling salts if I don't get too distracted trying to open the damn fish-tank. See ya."

---

Joker was finally drifting off to sleep that night when he heard Chambers whisper to the woman across from her. "I was talking about Thane today, and *she* admitted she likes *dangerous* men."

There was a giggle from the other bunk.

*Oh, fuck, not this again.* Nothing pissed him off like being woken up when he was almost asleep. It always took him at least half an hour to get there after he hit the sack. Screw the marines' fitness; he wanted their ability to sleep at the drop of a hat. How did they do it?

He pulled his pillow over his head and tried to ignore the (muffled) chatter.

A few minutes later, a thrown pillow hit his head.
"Oof. What the fuck, people, didn't anyone tell you this isn't a sixth grade camp?" he tossed the pillow into the middle of the floor.

"Oh, Joker, you could have tossed it back…"

"Shut it, Hotchkins!" Engineer Daniels snapped from the other side of the dividing wall.

Joker started to feel very kindly towards Daniels.

"Ach, Don't ruin it, woman, I'm tryin' to hear the girl-talk. I'm plannin' on paintin' my toes later."

"You too, Ken."

A grumpy voice came from the other direction. "Well, we're all awake now, so spit out your gossip and let us get to sleep."

"I'm sorry, we didn't mean to wake you up." Chambers sounded almost apologetic.

"You can't just not mean to, you have to mean not to."

Hotchkins wouldn't give up. "I just wanted to ask Moreau…"

"Ask Moreau what?" he snapped.

She tittered. "What you knew about the commander's lovers."

Joker put his head back under his pillow.

"Ahhh, come on!"

"Sixth. Grade. Camp."

"But you served with her before! You have to know!"

Relief came from an unexpected direction and in a thick Scots accent.

"For cryin' out loud, lass, you're a wee daft thing. You've clearly never served on an Alliance ship! I don' know what kind of rules and regs yer old Cerberus outfit runs with, because I honestly couldn't be arsed to read 'em, but aboard an Alliance vessel fraternization is a dirty word."

"Huh?"

How'd we end up shipping with a moron? No wonder she doesn't get bored scanning planets.

"You're not allowed to have relationships with crew too far beneath or above ye. And when you're the commander, that means you're not gettin' your jollies with anyone aboard your ship, ken? It keeps things from gettin' complicated."

Joker yawned. "Bingo, grand prize for having-a-fucking-clue goes to the man with the accent. One might also point out that we were fighting Saren and his fucking geth. Not to mention the reaper."

Hotchkins sniffed. "The Alliance is boring."

"Missing it more every minute." Joker fumbled on the shelf by his head for his earplugs as another pillow flew, thumping into the door.
Shepard heard a muffled thump and looked out the open door of the medbay.

"What the hell?"

The doctor sighed. "Some of the crew are not accustomed to barracks accommodations, Commander. Things have occasionally been getting a tad 'rowdy'."

Rhi put her head in her hand. "You have got to be kidding. It's like shipping with children."

The older woman smiled. "Oh, I always feel that way, dear."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, doc. I'd better go tell the kids to shut it so their friends can sleep." She started to rise, then paused. What she'd give for a competent NCO… still, it was definitely Not Her Job. "EDI, have Miranda report to the med lab." She sat back down. "Sorry, doc, where were we?"

"New hand. Your crib, Shepard."

She was examining her cards when Lawson showed up.

"You requested my presence, Shepard?"

Rhi raised an eyebrow and waited. Even Joker used her title when responding to commands, and he'd earned a lot more slack than Miss Miranda Lawson.

"Commander, what do you want with me?"

It'll have to do.

"The crew are causing a racket. Remind 'em it's lights out, would you?" She turned back to her game.

"Is this really an efficient use of my talents, Commander?" It game out through gritted teeth. Perfect gritted teeth, though.

Rhi kept her face neutral. "It was my understanding that you were to be second-in-command of this ship, Miranda. The XO is responsible for personnel discipline, among other things. Would you prefer to be relieved?"

"No, Commander."

"I'm glad to hear it. As for the crew, you can remind them that we have sleeping pods available, and if they can't settle down and let their crew-mates rest, we'll draw up a hot-bunk rotation. You shouldn't need any more threat than that."

"Yes, Commander."

That was an order, it's 'aye aye'. She sighed. Not a point worth making, really. She turned back to the doctor and placed her cards on the table.

"Fifteen two, fifteen four, and a run of three."

Chapter End Notes
I assume Chakwas is a chess master, but Rhi never learned. As always, critique is welcome. Go ahead: be brutal.
"Commander, urgent message coming in from the Illusive Man."

"Be right there."

He thought he caught a curse under her breath before she responded.

He needs a shorter nickname. Shepard clearly hated acknowledging his self-claimed title; she called him the puppet master, which had sounded almost poetic until she was three sheets to the wind, explaining at length to Garrus that 'the bastard just wants to stick his hand up your ass and make you twitch, fucker.'

That had a way of taking the poetry right out of it, really.

He didn't remember Shepard being quite so profane in the old days. Maybe she was and you just didn't have the privilege of hearing it. She could and did turn civility on and off like a switch. One minute it was professional decorum, the next, anatomical impossibilities combined with all the grammatical variations on the word 'fuck.'

Shepard was cool and professional as the Illusive Man briefed her: intercepted turian intel pointed to a disabled Collector vessel, an unparalleled opportunity to get to know their mysterious enemy. Joker had the coordinates locked in and their route planned before she issued the command, emerging into the CIC in a wave of determined energy that got everyone's attention.

"You have our destination, Joker."

"Coordinates punched in. Let's go find us a collector ship."

She rattled out a string of orders, the usual pre-mission prep, then he heard her footsteps behind him. She leaned on the back of his chair so she could speak quietly.

"Keep your eyes open. Something about this smells all wrong."

"It's Hotchkins. She has this stuff that makes it impossible to breathe in the crew quarters. It's gardenias or patchouli or rotting varen or something."

"Joker."

"I meant, if a turian patrol could take out a collector ship that easily, we wouldn't be worried about 'em."

"That's what I'm thinking. Keep sharp, I'm going to go get suited up."

Shepard reappeared at his shoulder just as they got their first visual. She was in armor, helmet under her arm.

"That thing's massive. How the hell did the turians take it out?"
She shrugged, eyes locked on the screen.

The monstrous ship looked eerily familiar. The cockpit felt too cold, and he shivered.

"You still planning on going in there?"

"If you have a better plan I'm all ears." Her tension was almost palpable. Not a good way to start a mission.

EDI reported that collector ship's thrusters were cold, drive-core offline, energy signature minimal.

"Dead in the water, or faking it?"

"Either way, it'll take time to fire up a ship that big. Don't let the Normandy get to cozy, Joker. First hint of a power-up and we skedaddle."

This more than smelled bad. It reeked. He talked to cover his nerves.

"Skedaddle? That a technical military term, Commander?"

"We can run like a bat out of hell, if you prefer."

"Jeez, I grew up on a space station and I even I know bats fly."

"High-tail it?"

The tension in the cockpit seeped away as they relaxed into their habitual banter. *It's just another job, and we're good at our jobs.*

"Rendezvous in thirty seconds, Commander. Good luck."

---

Rhi jumped lightly down from the shuttle, waving out her team. "Mercer, sit tight. We might have to make a quick get-away. Miranda, hold this point with Jacob and Thane – I don't want anything cutting us off. Garrus, Grunt, you're with me."

They started down the dark, undulating corridor.

As EDI's near-monotone relayed information, Rhi found herself wishing it was Joker's voice she was hearing, instead. Stupid. He was busy enough. She always had wondered whether anyone else on the old Normandy had worked at all…

---

EDI ran a comparison, and informed them that the Collector vessel was the one they'd chased off Horizon.

*So of course it's familiar. Nothing spooky.*

The vid feed revealed a disturbingly organic ship, floors flowing into walls. *Like walking inside someone's intestine. Gross.* It was the outside of the looming hulk that filled him with dread, though. *We need to get out of here.* He shivered again.

"EDI, are we having temperature fluctuations in here?"
"No, Mr. Moreau. The temperature of the Normandy remains at the standard 20 C."

The gooseflesh on his arms didn't agree.

The energy signature was still negligible. No weapons warming up, no core surging with power. And now the shore party was farther in, and still no collectors.

*It'll be fine, pull yourself together.*

The shore party had reached a terminal, and found their first collector corpse. Grunt and Garrus took look-out positions while Shepard set up a data stream.

He pulled up parts of the feed at random, slowing them down to a speed his eye could follow. Genetics? "EDI…"

The bridge went silent as EDI explained: the collectors were what remained of the protheans, genetically altered and enslaved.

Shepard cursed in surprise. She and Garrus were staring at the dead collector, voices betraying a mix of horror and awe, starting in on a discussion of the relative evils of genocide versus enslavement or something.

Joker interrupted, "Lets chat about the ramifications later, once everyone's off the freaky ship, yeah?"

*Look, it's dead, chill out, it's…*

…but it's too familiar.

Too familiar.

"EDI, do you have access to the logs of the original Normandy?"

"Yes, which –"

"Blackbox. Check this against the ship that took us out."

*Took us out.*

*Killed the Normandy.*

*Killed Shepard.*

*You're jumping to conclusions.*

"The EM profiles match, Mr. Moreau. They are the same ship."

*Is it still paranoia when you're right?*

He radioed the commander, trying to keep his voice light, hoping his fear came across as excitement. *I'm better now, we're quicker now, it won't happen again. I won't lose her again."

"…that is way beyond coincidence." There was a growl in her voice. Shepard's voice. Alive. *Won't happen again.*

"Something doesn't add up, Commander. Watch your back!"
A heavy lump of fear had settled in the back of his throat.

His attention was glued to his screens, ready to call them back the moment he saw so much as a blip from the ship and wheel the *Normandy* away to safety.

He checked in on the base team. "How's our bouncers? Seen anything interesting?"

Miranda sounded irritated. "Not a thing, Moreau. It's safe. The Illusive Man's information is always good."

*Yeah, but he's not.*

Shepard's team had entered an open space, a huge room that had to stretch the length of the ship. Every wall was lined with the collectors' gruesome pods. *Body bags.* EDI confirmed the team's suspicions. It wasn't hyperbolic. There were enough pods to contain the population of the earth.

*So what? We already knew they were nasty body snatchers, stop being horrified and just get the hell out of there.*

Shepard must have had a similar thought. "Keep moving, people."

The team was jogging towards a sunken platform, now, aiming for the glowing console at its center. He heard Garrus remark on the absence of collector bodies, living or dead.

*Glad I'm not the only one that caught that.* Aside from the corpse on the lab bench, they hadn't seen a one.

"Cover me. We'll have EDI strip the data and then we're out of here." The screens lit up with data, too fast to follow. He didn't even try to track it. *Just watch that energy sig. Be ready to run.*

The screens went blank.

*What?*

To his left, the image of a collector flashed, insectile visage demonic red. *Oh, shit…*

The cockpit went black.

He might hate having the AI onboard, but it was quick. EDI's calm voice explained that there had been a dangerous surge in power even as she rerouted it and stabilized their systems. The black-out was only momentary.

"Shepard!"

Her voice was tense, but not frantic. "Everyone's alright, Joker. What just happened?"

"Major power surge. Everything went dark but we're back up now."

EDI quickly detailed the measures she'd taken to protect the *Normandy*, adding "Shepard, it was not a malfunction. This was a trap."

Shepard growled. "No fucking shit."

Rhi fired a quick burst as yet another collector body jerked into the air, suffused with light, a sight
she'd last seen on Horizon.

Damn, it's going to start to talk.

She gave it a full round and it dropped like a stone, but Harbinger just picked a different body. The transformation was complete before she spotted the new host, and the deep voice rolled out of the possessed drone.

"I am the Harbinger."

She ducked behind a barrier to reload. Could we stop with the fucking melodrama? This is really irritating.

"I know you'll feel this."

The fire whizzed over her head. Not if you keep missing.

She should have been glad the thing was so obsessed with her – as long as it kept talking, she knew where it was. But –

"If I have to tear you apart, Shepard, I will."

– having a mysterious body-swapping alien threaten you by name was still nerve-wracking. Especially when it wouldn't shut up.

Joker could feel sweat at his temples. He couldn't do anything to help them, not now. Garrus's vid swung around, and he could see Shepard, moving, shooting, but it wasn't enough. He desperately wanted her voice to reassure himself that she was alive.

He kept silent. Interruptions could kill.

Garrus dropped the last drone just as a light blinked on Joker's console.

Shit. "The collector ship is powering up!" This time the panic did come through. "You need to get out of there before their weapons come online. I'm not losing another Normandy!"

He felt awful as he said it, but it was done, and there was work to do. He radioed Mercer as the base team scrambled back aboard the shuttle, talking her through the route to the new pick-up point, then he radioed engineering. "Ken, Tali, we're going to need max thruster power here real soon!"

"You cannot resist!"

Watch me, fucker!

Shepard held out her hand, surging with biotic energy, and pulled the glowing drone out of cover. Her squad's combined fire took him down. The last one, for now. They just keep coming.

"EDI, where am I going?"

"Six meters ahead, then turn right."
The turn brought them into a hall where husks were crawling from every crevice. She sent a shock wave in front of her, throwing the moaning bodies against the walls, and ran.

Behind her she heard the thud-thud-thud of enemies becoming corpses as they hit the floor.

"Shit, Mercer, not that way! 3.2 x, 1 z, floor it!"

Joker slipped the *Normandy* down her own z-axis and rolled her to starboard, trying to clear the dangerous bow of their massive attacker and catch the shuttle at the same time. It wouldn't be a gentle pick-up, but the shuttle would be safe.

Lights flashed, green and red. Shuttle on board; deck impact not fully controlled.

"Shuttle?" he snapped at EDI.

"Safe; surface damage negligible."

"That's it. Strap in, people! We're gonna make 'em work for it this time!"

Freed from waiting, the *Normandy* surged forward. A beam weapon stabbed out from the Collector vessel, and he rolled her away from its path. They were still so close they didn't even have to factor in light-lag.

"C'mon, baby, we can do this, dance for me…"

His fingers were white, his jaw clenched, but he'd spent the majority of his idle time at the helm developing maneuvers for this exact situation.

For this attack.

For this ship.

His focus was absolute; he didn't notice Shepard's pounding footsteps as she ran to his post, still in armor. The way his heart pounded and his legs quivered at being in this spot, again – that could be dealt with later. For now his hands were steady as he flipped them around the Collectors' path, an obscene dance with destruction, always one step ahead of the more ponderous vessel, zig-zagging unpredictably towards the relative safety of her broadside.

"EDI, find us an FTL path. Anywhere but here!"

Shepard's voice was frosty as she explained their situation to the crew. She refused to lie on the Illusive Man's behalf, so she picked her phrasing carefully. "The Illusive Man believed it was necessary for the completion of the mission that we be genuinely unaware of the trap." *Emphasis on 'the Illusive Man believed', because I sure don't.*

She didn't hear Kelly's inquiry as she left the comm room. She could hear nothing over the rage in her skull.

She passed by the elevator for the maintenance shaft, climbed to her cabin, and cranked the music. It surged through her, but instead of carrying her anger away, it gave it more energy. She tore open the desk drawer, but the only bottle there was empty, drained the last time she talked to her puppet master, and she hadn't restocked on Illium. She'd been being so *good.*
Rhi pulled her hand back in a fist, hardly conscious of the blue biotic ripples along her body, and slammed it full strength into the cabin wall.

It dented.

Under cover of the music, she screamed through gritted teeth.

Joker saw them safely to a far orbit, and then everything he'd pushed to the back of his mind caught up with him. He had to get somewhere quiet.

The elevator was only a momentary sanctuary, and one glance out the open doors when it stopped told him the crew deck was too active, all shifts awake discussing their near miss. Kelly Chambers was moving among them, too, and the last thing he needed was another damn counselor.

He went all the way down to the hangar, and walked past the makeshift gym to the kodiak’s cradle. The shuttle would need a new paint job, but her hull was sound. And if anyone asked, he could say he was checking the damage.

Safe inside the powered-down shuttle he collapsed in the pilot's seat, shoulders shaking. He closed his eyes and surrendered to the fear and guilt he'd pushed aside to get them to safety.

He tried to tell himself that he'd done it, that they'd survived, he'd been given a second chance and used it, but the memory of facing the same ship two years ago was more vivid than facing it in the last hour. It had worn its place in his mind. And every time it might, just might, have been laid to rest, there'd been another call from the brass. Tell us what happened when the Normandy crashed. Tell us what happened when Shepard died.

The crew of the first Normandy had been split up, ostensibly to send their skills where they were most needed, but after the first individual debriefing the real reason was clear: It would be easier to cover-up what really happened if none of the crew could back each other up.

He'd refused to change his report, of course, refused to tarnish Shepard's memory by suggesting she might be delusional. Fuck them all. He'd flown the ship that took down a goddamn reaper.

He'd heard Sovereign talk, on Virmire, by way of the helmet cam. Of course, that footage hadn't been blackboxed; it went down with the Normandy. And "No one is suggesting you were suffering hallucinations, Mr. Moreau, but convincing digital projections are unfortunately easy to create. Saren Arterius was clearly a deep planner, and the 'entity' on Virmire was most likely an act of psychological warfare."

Therapy had been psychological warfare.

He'd written to Chakwas and Alenko. Their replies were so heavily censored they might as well have written about the weather, and he could only assume his messages had received the same treatment.

He hadn't been grounded. Not then. Just stuck running simple shuttle flights to and from Arcturus, in easy reach whenever the brass wanted him to 'see if he remembered anything new', which was the English translation for 'remember things the way we want you to remember them.'

Then they held Shepard's funeral.

He should have kept sober, faked normal, healthy grief, and used the opportunity to compare notes
with his old crew-mates, allowed for once to be in contact on this most somber occasion. Obvious, in retrospect.

Up to that point, anger had kept him going. Rage at the clumsy cover-up operation, at the ham-handed efforts to deny a very real threat, had almost drowned out the guilt and loss. Anger was the reason he drank before the service, afraid that if he were actually paying attention he'd scream as the brass damned Shepard with faint praise. Maybe throw a crutch at them. Damn him, he'd been worried about their words.

He didn't even hear the solemn pompous speeches. From the moment he saw Shepard's image projected over the empty coffin, he hadn't heard anything at all.

Without her, he couldn't save her.

He was alone in the life pod.

She was drifting away.

_In space, no one can hear you scream._

He was screaming her name.

The explosion rocked the husk of the _Normandy_, blasting the Commander's body into space. Killing her.

_It didn't killed her. She died cold and alone._

Her fist came down on the pod launch. She was on the outside.

_He'd looked into her eyes as she remembered dying._

Her hand on his arm, pulling him out of his chair, supporting his weight across her shoulders.

_It was the only time she'd touched him._

The hull was ripped open, the CIC open to the black.

The commander told him to evacuate.

_He wasn't going to let her die._

The commander told him to evacuate.

He spun them into evasives, but the first blast had done too much damage. She was a crippled bird trying to fly.

He heard the order to evacuate, but he couldn't let the _Normandy_ die.

Without her, he couldn't save her.

He didn't remember leaving the memorial service. He did remember the first bar, and Kaidan's worn face when he showed up at the clinic the next morning to bail him out.

They could have talked, then, but Kaidan received urgent commands the moment they'd gotten back to his apartment. Couldn't allow too much buddy time for the crew of the _Normandy_.


This time the shrinks had more ammunition.

Grief. Feelings of guilt. It wasn't your fault while we slyly hint yes it was, yes it was. Guilt is why you can't let go of this fairytale. Fairies wear boots and you've got to believe me. You want to believe in the cosmic threat so her death had more meaning. I saw it, I saw it, I tell you no lies. These things happen; soldiers die of ordinary causes every day, it doesn't make their death meaningless. It was just the geth. Just the geth. Just a death.

He tried to explain why he had to save the Normandy. Save her to save her. He was useless without the ship; useless to everyone, useless to himself, useless to Shepard. Saving the Normandy was the most important thing he could do.

Let's talk about your relationship with the ship, Mr. Moreau...

I failed her. I watched her end and couldn't do anything. It was my fault.

Placing a higher value on the vessel than the lives within... recommend he be removed from duty...

---

Rhi slumped against the wall, cool metal against her scarred cheek, fighting back tears of frustration.

She had to be able to think. People relied on her; she was no good to anyone like this.

But all she felt was blind anger.

She hadn't felt like this since she was a teen, hormones raging, a street kid locked in a fancy school. She'd broken shit and picked fights, and she would have been thrown out if not for the Alliance marine who showed up to knock sense into her, giving her a direction for her energy.

She stared at the dent she'd left in the wall. Sparring was out of the question, now. How could she trust herself not to hurt someone?

She thought of the husks raining down dead behind her as she ran. Hell, even her enemies didn't stay alive long enough for her to vent her anger.

It was an uncharacteristically bloody thought, and it terrified her.

I can't be like this.

Even without a partner, she could still wear herself out. She picked up a water bottle and headed to the hangar.

---

Get out of there before their weapons come online. I'm not losing another Normandy.

Why had he said that? Why, when Shepard was still fighting on an enemy ship?

Placing a higher value on the vessel than the lives within... recommend he be removed from duty...

His eyes were tight shut, nails digging into his palms. That isn't me. They were wrong.

They were wrong.
Wrong.

You spent all that time reliving it, wishing to do it differently, and you can. You did. They're safe, the commander and the ship.

He took a deep breath, centering himself on the sharp pain where his nails had dug into his hand, and opened his eyes. The interior of the kodiak was still and dim, but he could see movement in the hangar through the forward screen. He froze, then remembered it was impossible to see into the shuttle from outside. He leaned forward, searching for what had startled him.

Shepard was near the gym mats, aft by the elevator, arm outstretched, biotically lofting the heavy crates of supplies. Building a barrier between herself and the windows of the engineering deck companionway. A castle. From the shift in the cargo, she'd been there awhile.

The last building block settled.

She knelt on one knee, took a brushed-metal box from her pocket, and laid it open on a box.

What is she doing?

She closed her eyes and reached both hands behind her head. They came away with a tiny object that flashed metallic when the light hit it. Shepard opened her eyes and nestled the amp into the box.

Joker wished desperately that he'd realized when she first shown up, so he could have left. He couldn't explain why, but he wouldn't have felt more intrusive if she'd stripped naked.

The spot at the base of her skull felt cool, as if she could feel the air flowing where her amp usually rested. She'd been assured it was just her imagination, but she always thought she could sense the hole. She almost always left it in, for the same reason she always had ration bars in her pocket, but now she needed to exhaust herself, and the amp would just make it take longer.

Rhi stripped down to her tank top, wrapped her hands, and turned to the heavy bag. She had no need to warm up; she hadn't stopped moving since she stepped of the shuttle into the collector ship.

Her blows were fast and hard, even without biotic amplification. She didn't let herself pretend it was the illusive man's face; she wanted to work out her rage, not fuel it. Fueling it wouldn't do her crew any good. Let it go, let it go, let it all go.

When the sweat started to pour she peeled off another layer. When her shoulders tired she switched to kicks, then back to punches, until her muscles started to quiver in exhaustion.

He watched her. He couldn't help it.

Shepard's alive. She's as safe as any of us, and we're both safe in the Normandy.

It should be like it never happened. Of course, it wasn't. Still, most people didn't get this kind of second chance.

Sweat was dripping under her black sports bra, shining on her back. He closed his eyes and willed that image to stay with him. Not a disembodied voice in armor; a woman, warm, alive. Alive. He
remembered holding her, feeling her warm weight on his shoulder. Alive.

*We survived today, and we'll do it again.*

He could see the subtle play of muscles in her taut belly when she kicked, the lines of muscle along her back when she turned.

*The ship isn't more important than you. It never was.*

She was leaning over, hands on her knees, exhausted.

*Can you forgive me, Shepard?*

Chapter End Notes

Normally I avoid using in-game dialogue, but the first half of this chapter is full of it, so let it not be forgotten: bioware owns the game and characters (except for poor Mercer, and that ditz Hotchkins). Fairies Wear Boots lyrics are by Black Sabbath.

If you enjoyed today's combination of action and angst, thank my beta TeraDanielle, who wanted to know more of Joker's lost years and gently reminded me that sometimes, we have to advance the plot.

Also! I seem to have put the gym in an area that should regularly get depressurized. Imagine, if you will, that either A) the ship's mass-effect generated artificial gravity is enough to hold everything in place while the atmosphere gets sucked out to let the shuttle leave, or B) they've got a protective energy field set up between the aft section and the forward bit where the shuttle davits are. It's magic mass-effect science!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Kaidan & Cocktail Umbrellas

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shepard woke with a mild ache in her muscles that she knew would be stronger the next day, but her head felt clear. She'd always liked mornings. Morning meant you'd lived through another night. She missed the sun's rays on her face, with their promise of warmth and light for a new day, but a hot shower would suffice.

She put her thoughts in order under the flow of the scalding-hot water.

Whatever Cerberus had done for her, the Illusive Man was a vile manipulator who could not be trusted, even to aid the mission he had set in motion.

The collectors were a very real threat, not just to Terminus colonies, but to all of humanity.

She would worry about the former after she'd dealt with the latter; the collectors were the greater danger. And the collectors won't fund the destruction of Cerberus. Might as well start with the one that isn't paying the bills.

She stopped off in the mess to grab a ration bar and a mug of coffee before she called her team together.

"We're headed to the Citadel. We'll have additional armor added to the Normandy there. Jacob, you'll look for ways to improve our personal armament. Miranda, comb through your files and find me leads on Terminus worlds where we can do some training. I'm willing to do some odd-jobs if it gets people experience working together."

"What about the reaper IFF?"

"It'll have to keep."

Jacob looked askance at her.

She'd never explain her orders to Miranda, but Jacob didn't question her authority, and unlike the other operative he seemed genuinely conflicted with regard to Cerberus.

"Look. The derelict reaper could be as defenseless as the man says, but there's no way in hell I'll believe the collectors don't know about it. We have to assume when we take it that we're setting off red flags somewhere. We're not ready to deal with that kind of crap yet."

"We're pushing the Normandy's crew capacity as it is. How many more are we going to recruit?"

"None. We don't need a bigger team; we need a better one."
Miranda broke in, impatient. "The individuals we've recruited were hand-chosen by the Illusive Man himself. They are the best of the best."

Rhi sighed. A dozen annoying aphorisms about the non-existent 'I' in team ran through her head. *No wonder Cerberus projects always seem to self-destruct. Three heads pulling opposite directions.* "I didn't say we needed better people. We need a better team. That means they have to be able to work together, automatically and without second thoughts. We can't do that overnight."

Miranda arched one eyebrow. "If you expect me to be buddy-buddy with that foul-mouthed bitch in the hold – "

"I *expect* you to work with her, and do it well. How you feel about each other in your own heads is your own problem."

A glance at Jacob told her the argument was only with Miranda. He'd seen the wisdom of waiting as soon as she'd explained. *Either that, or he's just used to taking orders.*

"Understood?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Good. Joker, plot a course for the Citadel." Her radio was silent. "Joker?"

---

"Joker?"

From the sound of Shepard's voice, it wasn't the first time she'd asked. Shit. Joker slid into his chair as quickly as he could.

"We're headed for the Citadel."

"Aye aye, Commander. Setting course."

He took another sip of coffee, hoping the caffeine would ease his headache. He felt like death warmed over. *Though, Shepard probably qualifies as death warmed over, and she doesn't look half bad.*

He'd stayed in the kodiak long after she had left the hangar, not wanting to chance running into her. She'd worked herself to such a level of exhaustion that she'd been unable to move the heavy cargo crates even with her amp back in, and had almost stumbled on her way back to the elevator.

She'd had the right idea, though. He wished now he'd followed her example and gotten some exercise instead of heading to his bunk. Maybe then he would have been able to sleep. The quiet, drained feeling that followed intense emotion had shown up on time, but it didn't bring sleep with it, and after a few hours, intense emotion decided to have a go at round two.

Sometime around 0300 he got up and raided Chakwas' supplies for a sleep aid, which explained why he'd overslept this morning. *With any luck I'll actually wake up sometime this afternoon."

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, willing the headache to go away, took another long sip of coffee, then broke orbit and got the *Normandy* underway.

---

Joker's omnitool flashed a message alert as they passed the comm-buoy near the Citadel relay, but
he didn't bother checking it until he'd safely docked at the Silaris Corp's Citadel ship-yard, where Shepard had arranged for the Normandy's armor to be upgraded.

He was surprised to have any messages at all. Sure, there was usually a backlog of odd news announcements on subjects he'd been interested in for some forgotten reason, and the never-ending ads for turian fringe extensions (n0 1 will kno iz n0t REEL!), but those went to a different account. Only a handful of people had his personal address. Hell, he wouldn't be surprised if Shepard had done better at keeping up with past acquaintances than he had, and she'd been dead.

What do you expect? When you're a depressive fuck no one wants to be around you. He'd unintentionally cut a lot of ties during those two years, a process completed when he dropped off the map to join Cerberus.

He'd resigned himself to reading another interminable message from his aunt when he actually bothered to look at the sender. Alenko? Huh. Kaidan's on the Citadel.

Shepard's voice echoed through the cockpit, thanking the crew for their hard work with the collector vessel and granting shore-leave. Good idea. As soon as the Silaris bots start working over the Normandy, it'll get loud in here. He lit up his omni-tool and messaged Alenko.


kA: Give me an hour. Aren't you working in the well-heeled private sector now? Spend your own ill-gotten gains.

jM: Didn't you just get promoted? There's no way you spent your bonus on Horizon. You'd have to buy goats or something.

kA: That doesn't mean I want to spend it on you.

jM: Aw, do I have to bat my pretty eyelashes at you?

kA: Jackass.

jM: Wow, you really DID spend it all on goats, didn't you?

kA: Upper level of Darkstar, and I'm not dragging you home.


The interior of the DarkStar lounge was, well, dark. It was also filled with a thudding techno beat that threatened to make his headache return. Luckily, Kaidan had chosen a little-used secondary bar where the ambient volume was a hair quieter. Joker snagged a stool next to him and ordered a gin and tonic.

Alenko looked at him with an expression of bafflement.

"Why goats?"

"Nice to see you, too."

"Yeah, you're looking well, man. No crutches! But why goats?"

"Hey, I'm not the one who bought 'em! You tell me."
"I didn't – " Kaidan thought better of arguing and shut his mouth, holding his hands up in defeat.

_Damn. He knows me too well._ When they'd first served together he'd gotten the marine flustered for almost an hour with a set-up like that.

"Hey, just to get it out of the way. You gonna give me a piece of your mind like the one you gave Shepard? 'Cause I brought my earplugs just in case."

"Earplugs?"

"That's what you forget about real crew quarters. The ones who don't snore, talk."

"And here I thought hot-bunking was bad."

"Bet you don't have to anymore, do you? Look at that shiny promotion. Who's butt d'you kiss to get that pinned on?"

He grinned to take the sting out of it. If Kaidan didn't lay into him about Cerberus, he wouldn't bring up that Alenko had agreed to lie about the reaper threat. How else could he still be in Alliance service, and promoted? _If his 'debriefing' was anything like mine…_

"At least it was Alliance ass."

"Like that doesn't stink?"

"Look, I'm not going to lecture you, but you are working for Cerberus. Ran off like a thief in the night to join them, even."

"I'm sure I would have remembered if I ran. I can walk, but my upgrades didn't go that far. Besides, did you get a load of the way the brass was censoring messages? I couldn't have told anyone anything if I tried."

"But… Cerberus!"

"The paycheck comes from Cerberus. The orders come from Shepard."

"And where do her orders come from?"

"Somewhere between her ears, I'd think."

"Do you mean…"

"I mean her brain, dumb-ass. What, d'you think I should go back and suggest Shep wear a tinfoil hat to keep out the voices? Don't worry, there's no freaky mind-control chip." He grinned. "The Cerberus operative who worked on her is actually really pissed about that." He sipped his drink.

"Shepard was _modified by Cerberus?_" Kaidan's eyes widened. "Just stop talking. This gets worse and worse. Bad enough that she's working with them at all. Bad enough that – I mean, not that we had any special relationship or anything, but – " he paused, flustered.

_I know she rejected you, you dork, she told me._

" – How heartless do you have to be to let all your friends _think you're dead?_"

Joker slammed his drink down, ice rattling in the glass.
"You don't get it, do you, Alenko? She. Was. DEAD."

Kaidan just stared at him. "That's impossible."

"It was impossible. Now it's just highly unlikely."

"So, cryo?"

"Nope. Dead."

"A clone."

"Nope. Back from the dead."

"This is part of your zombie obsession, isn't it?"

"Haven't noticed any moaning, so, no."

The concepts of 'moaning' and 'Shepard' had never shared the same thought before – and now it wasn't zombie-moaning he was thinking of. Where the hell did that come from? No. No, no, no. He scowled into his glass and muddled the lime with more than the required attention.

Luckily, Kaidan was deep in his own thoughts. "Dead? She was dead. For two years?"

"Pretty much. I'm not sure where the line is when they're bringing someone back piece by piece. And hey, if you talk to the commander again, don't harp on about the dead thing, okay? Makes her uncomfortable."

"...and I... my god, I was an ass."

"See, if only you'd paid attention to your good friend Joker, you would have known that years ago."

"Hey, don't rage at the guy who paid your bail."

Joker scrubbed his hand across his eyes. "Yeah, that was a one-off. Not a situation I'll need help with again."

"You sure about that?" The genuine concern in Kaidan's voice made him uncomfortable.

"Hell yeah, I got my baby back. And the Commander."

Kaidan shook his head. "Someone needs to teach you about priorities, dude."

"Yeah, that's what the shrinks said, too."

Kaidan looked shocked. "...is it true?"

"Well, when you look at the functionality and expense of a ship, as compared to a human... oh, get over it, of course it's not fucking true! I'd crash the ship to save her – to save lives. Obviously."

Kaidan caught his slip. "Just to save her, huh?" He grinned into his drink. "Don't get thinking along those lines. You wouldn't have a chance."

Yeah, rub it in, why don't you. "Seems to me I wasn't the one making passes at my CO. What the hell got into you?"
"Oh, damn. You did hear about that." The other man shrugged, unashamed. "Like I said. She was an amazing woman."

"Is."

"I don't know what she is now."

It made him angrier than it should have. "So, you die and are brought back two years later by an organization you fought. Are you saying you'd do better?"

"Whoa, whoa. I'm just saying – look, it's been two years."

He'd always gotten along with Kaidan. So why did he wish he was a brawny marine so he could wipe the floor with him right now? Every time Alenko implied that Shepard should have been better, stronger, more perfect, he saw her screaming in her sleep or curled on the floor of the hangar, insecure, asking him how to make her body hers again, as if he could possibly help her. *She's doing the best she can. Leave her alone!*

He took a deep breath. "It hasn't been two years for her. She's still Shepard. Highly competent, disturbingly energetic, tries not to get people hurt if she can help it," *mostly,* "still gives the crew little half-stories so they'll wonder about her. Same quirky humor, same ear-drum shattering taste in music." *Which she recently got from me, so I just dissed myself. Again.*

Kaidan was staring at him. "Quirky… you knew her taste in music?"

"Nah, I just knew it was loud. Tried to reach her on the comm once in the SR1 when she had headphones on. Had to send an ensign to actually tap her on the shoulder."

"That'd be negligence. Shepard wouldn't have done that."

"Lighten up, man. We were docked somewhere. Citadel, I think. Everyone has to take a break sometime."

"I suppose, yeah. But… Shepard was always so totally focused on the job. N7, the perfect marine."

*Huh.* The bond between marines who shared cover when the bullets flew had always seemed like an unsurpassable one. It was strange to realize that he'd known Shepard better than Kaidan had even before her death.

---

Rhi flinched as another bot thudded into the hull of the *Normandy.* Except for the engineers supervising the retrofit, the crew was wisely elsewhere. *Time to follow their lead.*

She stopped at the cockpit before leaving, as she usually did, and was surprised to find the pilot's seat empty. *Shore-leave. Right.* She exited the airlock and caught a taxi for the wards. There was something she wanted to do before the morning's feeling of determination slipped away from her.

---

"You're more down on the Alliance than I thought. The shrinks really gave you a hard time, didn't they?"

"Hey, y'know what this is missing? Umbrella. It's not a real shore-leave drink without a little paper umbrella."
"Joker, no one puts cocktail umbrellas in gin and tonics." Kaidan's heavy eyebrows came together in consternation, "Or is it gins and tonic?"

"A gin and tonic. And she will," he pointed at the waitress, "if I ask nicely."

"No, man, it's just wrong. It's an alcoholic faux pas."

At that point he had to go through with it, just to annoy Kaidan.

The waitress was an older turian who clearly wasn't used to being cajoled. Now he had two little paper umbrellas. Unfortunately, his ploy to distract Alenko hadn't been as successful.

The marine shook his head. "Was it really that bad?"

Joker looked at the bar rather than meet his eyes, and his voice was bitter. "Well, apparently it was a lot easier if you were willing to say Shepard was crazy, wasn't it, Alenko?"

Now it was Kaidan's turn to growl. "I didn't lie, but I knew I couldn't do any good discharged, either. I just told them I wasn't sure what was going on and I wanted to do my best. All, technically, true. None of us really have a clue what's going on."

Joker stared at him. "You can really let it go as easily as that? The way those smug bastards tried to get you to renege on reality? You didn't think, maybe, if we all stood up for Shepard…?"

"She was dead, Joker. Standing up for her wasn't going to do her any good! The real question is why you didn't do the same thing once the writing was on the wall."

Joker glared at the glossy finish of the bar, glad his hat hid his eyes. His voice was almost inaudible. "You didn't kill her."

Kaidan stared at him, shocked. "Neither did you."

"Bullshit. If I had followed the initial order to evacuate, Shepard wouldn't have died, and we'd be having a much different conversation right now."

"That's not the same." The other man's jaw clenched. "Shepard didn't say she thinks that, did she?"

"No," he downed the last of his drink, "but she didn't say she doesn't, either."

—

Shepard re-entered the Normandy with a spring in her step and a burning sensation on her upper arm. It was a good pain; one she had chosen. Another thing to thank Joker for. She smiled to herself. The Illusive Man seemed to have got at least one thing right, after-all. He'd recruited Moreau.

She remembered the night when she feared she'd been wrong to trust Joker, that the only thing he cared about was flying. The pain in his voice when she talked to him had put that worry to rest. I was in a bad place. She'd never asked him to explain more. If he'd wanted to, he would have.

She turned toward the cockpit, debating whether or not to show him her new acquisition, but it was still empty. She rapped on the AI's projection area. "EDI? Where's Joker?"

"Mr. Moreau left the ship 47 minutes after you granted leave."

Hmm. He certainly deserved the time off if anyone did, still, the deck seemed awfully empty.
without him. She wasn't inclined to spend more time in the solitude of her cabin than she had to, so
she decided to wait.

Joker left the taxi at the Silaris yard and made for the gantry to the Normandy. The bots had
finished the heavy work for the moment, and engineers were crawling over the ship's hull making
adjustments. With any luck the rest of the crew would still be scraping the last possible enjoyments
out of their allotted leave-time.

Making Kaidan uncomfortable by sweet-talking an aged turian waitress had definitely been the
high point of the afternoon, unfortunately. If only he'd known that getting involved with galaxy-
saving quests meant all your conversations had to be so loaded. There should be a warning on the
packet: contact with heroism may cause uncontrollable outbreaks of depth, moodiness, and hives.

As he exited the airlock he was startled out of his reverie by a noise from the cockpit. Someone
was in his chair.

He walked over, wishing he'd devoted a little more time to physical therapy in the last few weeks
and could manage a more even stride. "If you've messed any of my presets, I'll –"

The seat swung part-way around, and the commander held out a hand, all innocence.

"Hey, don't worry so much. Even I can't crash the Normandy while she's parked."

He crossed his arms. "Docked, and I wouldn't put it past you."

Shepard shook her head, turning back to face the front. "I'm afraid you have an exaggerated opinion
of my talents."

He stood behind his seat and glanced around; no one else was in earshot. "And who would be
responsible for that, Commander TigerShark?"

"This is what I get for telling my deep dark secrets." She sighed. "Hey, can you shift to the side or
something? I can't see you without getting a crick in my neck."

"You're kidding."

"What?"

"You do this to me all the time. It's payback."

She clicked her tongue. "Damn, I'm insufferable."

"Yeah, you're in my chair."

"You weren't. I wanted to know if it's as comfortable as you keep saying." She wiggled her butt
back and forth in his seat. "Where were you?"

"This generous Commander I know gave me shore leave."

She tilted her head back to look at him with an impish smile. Her eyes were a clear brown that
picked up amber from the cockpit lighting. "Tell me more about this commander."

He crossed his arms on the headrest and leaned over, her face upside down to his. "She's in my
chair."
Shepard scowled ferociously. "Bitch."

Her good humor was totally at odds with the black mood that had plagued him since fleeing the collector ship. If it had been anyone else he would have found it irritating, but instead he felt the ice start to melt, his anger at Kaidan ebbing away. The wide grin that met her comic scowl was almost involuntary.

She grinned back. "Get up to anything fun on leave? Or illegal?"

"Is there a difference?"

"I'd say yes. Jack'd say no. Which one would you rather take advice from?"

"Touché." He tried to guess how Shepard would react to knowing their former colleague was on the station. She hadn't seemed overly concerned with Kaidan when she'd run into him – just angry. "Alenko's on the citadel. Went out for drinks."

"Good. Maybe a drink or two'll work the boy-scout stick out of his butt." She put her hand over her mouth. "Oops, did I say that out-loud?"

The coy act was so totally at odds with her personality that he laughed. "I won't repeat it. Until the worst possible moment."

"At least you're dependable. I wonder why Kaidan's on the Citadel and not Arcturus? They must have him running errands for Anderson..." she trailed off, thoughtful. "How was it?"

"I think I managed to convince him that you were dead, not just ignoring his phone calls. Didn't you tell him?"

"No, not really." She caught his look. "Come on, I'm sure he's heard that excuse before. 'I lost your number,' 'I was busy,' 'I've been dead' – no one buys that shit."

He shook his head, but he didn't press her. "What did you get up to? If I can ask the Commander about her super-secret world-saving business."

She sighed, and gestured at the data pad in her lap. "Just now I was reading some of Mordin's invaluable collector intel."

"Anything useful?"

"I just plowed through seven almost incomprehensible pages on collector anatomy to get to the conclusion that I should shoot them in the head, like everything else. So, no, not really."

"You choose really crappy ways to spend your shore-leave, Commander."

"Not entirely. I bought a hamster, nicer coffee, and," Her face grew serious for a moment, "I took your advice."

He tried to think what she might possibly be referring to, and came up blank. "You took advice from me? Didn't anyone tell you that's a bad idea?"

" Doesn't seem like such a bad idea to me."

"You buy a hat? Windshield wipers for the Normandy?"

"Advice about tattoos." She looked uncertain for an instant, vulnerable, and then it was gone.
He'd thought of that as more an admission than advice. "Really? Where?"

The impish grin was back. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Oh, no you don't."

"It's on your butt, isn't it, Joker? Just admit it."

*What kind of tasteless idiot does she think I am? Oh, right, the kind I usually am.* "Nope."

"Nope you won't admit it, or nope it's not on your ass?"

"Option two. And did you say you bought a hamster, or am I hearing things?"

She looked sheepish. "It made Tali giggle. We named it Boochika vas Paws."

"You bought a hamster. For a space ship."

"So it's a space hamster."

"You going to start talking like one of those 20th century sci-fi vids where they stick the word 'space' onto everything?"

"You have a problem with that, space-pilot?"

"Yeah. You're in my space-chair."

She laughed. "Okay, okay, you win, I'm getting up. There, happy?" She glanced from him to the seat. "Well?"

He smirked. "Oh, I don't actually need to do anything up here. I'm heading to the crew deck."

She gave him a flat stare.

"It's my chair."

"Territorial beast."

"Grr."

They turned and walked toward the elevator. Whether it was his brightening mood or the insulation provided by the drinks earlier, he didn't feel self-conscious as they crossed the long expanse of deck. Shepard's pace was shore-leave-lazy, a saunter he had no difficulty keeping up with.

When they stopped to wait for the elevator, she cocked her head to the side. "Joker, why do you have a cocktail umbrella behind your ear?"

"It was shore-leave."

She seemed to think that a totally reasonable answer. He remembered the second umbrella and fished it out of his pocket. "Want one?"

Shepard grinned like a kid at the sight of the bright green umbrella, popped it open, and slid the toothpick into her tight regulation bun, turning her head so he could admire the effect.

"Excellent. Now it looks like you actually had fun."
She rolled her eyes, grinning.

"See ya, Commander."

The doors opened for the crew-deck and Sheppard continued down to engineering.

Chapter End Notes

Joker's ear-umbrella is bright pink, if anyone's wondering.
On the second day of the Normandy's retrofit, Joker finally steeled himself to putting in some time on his long-avoided physical therapy.

It made it easier to know that most of the crew was still spending as much time station-side as possible. Even so, he considered collecting what he'd need and seeing if he could manage in the interior of the docked shuttle, but when he reached the hangar he saw that Shepard hadn't had the cargo re-stowed after she'd shifted it all to give herself privacy after their encounter with the collector ship. Helping himself to the commander's 'castle' was easier than moving gear.

He started with the same controlled exercises he'd always used, careful never to put sideways pressure on bones and joints. When he was warmer, he found a spot by a heavy crate with a handle he could use to hold himself in a stretch.

The surgeries Cerberus had funded were slightly more advanced than he'd told Shepard, but not by much. It wasn't actually the first time he'd had rods in his bones, either, but the ones he'd had as a kid had caused trouble as he outgrew them. Now, each contained a channel for dispensing site-specific medication should the need arise, and some of them were made of more than one part. The latter had been used to slowly straighten his bowed tibia, easing the misshapen bone back into something like normal and dragging soft tissues along with it.

It took months, but thankfully he hadn't been stuck in a hospital for most of it. Not that flying simple shuttle runs was much better, but... who was he fooling. Simple shuttle relays were heaven compared to the smell of antiseptic and feeling of total helplessness. He hated hospitals.

He reminded himself that he was on the Normandy, working and useful again, and not in a damn clinic, and set to work.

For the first time in years both of his legs were straight, but they hadn't sent a memo to his back about the changed arrangement, and his hamstrings weren't in on it either. Joker chose something to read on his omnitool before he bent into the stretch. The marines might get away with stretching to the count of sixty, but muscles that had been contracted for years required more persuasion.

Twenty to thirty minutes of persuasion.

It started off easy. It looked easy. After the first five minutes, it started to get wearing. By the last five... the therapist's words rang in his head as if the doctor was in the hangar with him: If it doesn't feel like everything's broken when you let up, you weren't doing it right.

He really needed to get out of that chair more often. Damn it.

He was well into the stretch when he heard the elevator door open. Shit. He couldn't even turn to see who it was. He wouldn't mind so much if it was Chakwas or Shepard – Chakwas already knew all his weaknesses, and Shepard hadn't been such bad company the time she'd run into him in the gym – but the doctor would have announced herself, and he knew the sound of Shepard's footsteps. Some other crew-member was going to catch him at his most vulnerable, instead.
He cursed his timing and his luck as Jacob Taylor, Mister Abs Of Steel himself, walked into his field of vision. He just managed to return Taylor's friendly greeting with a civil nod.

The other man started his own warm-ups.

It wasn't the stretch itself that was so damn embarrassing. It was releasing it. And once Jacob got going, he'd be here for hours. Joker could manage, maybe, ten more minutes. And then there'd be that awful sixty seconds where all he wanted to do lie on the floor and cry like a kicked puppy as the strained muscles sorted themselves out. No one else was supposed to see that bit.

He tried not to look as Taylor went smoothly about his routine. He wished that the marine wasn't such a nice guy, so he could feel good about hating him. He knew it wasn't fair, just like he knew that Jacob probably wasn't paying any attention to him at all, but knowing didn't help him feel less like a crippled insect under glass.

"Did you hear that the drell has a son? And he's on the citadel?" Jacob's voice was friendly. Holy shit, the man can have a normal conversation while doing speed crunches. How is that even possible? Even Shepard stopped to talk!

"Nope, hadn't heard." Five more minutes. I can hold this for five more minutes.

" Weird to think of a hired killer having a family, y'know?" Jacob's low opinion of assassins was well known. Joker had his own misgivings about the drell – he and Samara shared the same kind of spooky calm – but compared to the unstable half-naked biotic and the test-tube krogan, Thane almost counted as normal. Hell, they had a real unrepentant mercenary aboard, too, and he didn't see Jacob complaining about him. Possibly because Zaeed has arms the size of his thighs and could kill with the power of ugly alone.

He was suddenly grateful that it was Jacob-of-the-perfect-physique and not Zaeed who'd interrupted his therapy. Wow, everything really is relative.

"Apparently Thane tried that good old 'do as I say, not as I do' parenting, and now Shep's going to help him track the kid down before he murders somebody."

"Just another day on the good old SSV Dysfunctional," Joker grunted. He was at the end of his endurance. "When're they going after the kid?"

"Garrus, Thane, and Shepard took off just before I came down."

Ah, shit. Who knew what kind of trouble they'd get into him watching them. He needed to get up to the bridge, and he was in no state to hurry.

He started easing out of the stretch, as slowly as his quivering muscles would allow. It was worse if he was quick. The pain as his hamstring released left him gasping for breath, but he glanced at Jacob and swallowed the sound that came with it. Fuuuuuuck. He allowed himself a minute resting his head on the crate before he straightened up, and tried to tell himself he didn't care that Taylor might see. The man was an exercise robot, anyway. No one sane did crunches like that.

When his muscles finally stopped twinging, Joker pulled himself to his feet and made for the elevator. He felt gross, but he wasn't in the mood for company. Anyone who got close enough to smell him deserved what they got.

Shepard was quiet as they left officer Bailey's office. Garrus interrupted the silence. "What's the
human phrase? A credit for your thoughts?"

"Humans've only known about the citadel for 28 years, and we already have kids slipping through the cracks here."

Garrus clicked sympathetically. "It is tragic to think of unwanted children."

Shepard didn't meet his eye. "Or children who are too afraid to go home." She squared her shoulders. "Okay, let's go find this 'Mouse.'"

The kid was about what she expected, though she was surprised to find that he already knew Thane. He was a little fish amongst larger ones, with pointier teeth, and he kept himself alive by being sly. Thane looked ready to press him for answers, but she held the drell back and they got their information by promising safety, not harm.

When she mentioned the blackmarket Shepard VI he'd been selling Mouse look terrified – and her earpiece suddenly rang with Joker's laughter. She shook her head and kept her expression serious. So, her eyes in the sky were back, even when she'd tried to give him the slip so that he'd get some damn rest. Everyone needs personal time. Still, she had to admit she liked knowing he was there on the other end of the radio, keeping track of her. Them.

"Chill out, kid. Give me a copy and we'll call it even." She pocketed the data chip containing the VI. "Let's get back to C-Sec and see what Bailey can do for us."

Garrus cocked his head to one side. "You're going to let him keep selling that?"

"Sure."

"I'm missing something. When you found out the Alliance was using your holo for PR advertisements, you were livid."

"The Alliance has other resources it can use. Mouse doesn't. I'm not going to wreck someone's life because I'm embarrassed."

Thane spoke up. "It seems you have sympathy for the boy, Commander."

She glanced at his dark eyes and nodded. As she walked away, she murmured under her breath "There but for fortune..."

——

"Commander. May I have a moment of your time?"

"Of course, Thane."

Shepard picked up her coffee mug and followed the drell into the life support area he'd claimed as his own. He'd spent the prior evening trying to become acquainted with his estranged son after they'd stopped his assassination attempt. Now the kid was doing community service for Bailey.

"I must thank you again for your aid with Kolyat. To see him continue down my road would have been… distressing."

"Glad to see you have a chance to patch things up."

"As am I. I do not know if Kolyat feels the same… but I hope that one day he might. I have been thinking a great deal about him. About his mother. About the ones we leave behind, those of us
who choose lives like this," a subtle gesture of his hand encompassed the entire ship, "Or have
them chosen for us. I did not think enough about those connections for many years. You helped me
before my chance was lost forever."

She shifted uncomfortably, unsure of how to respond to such deep and private thoughts. "You're
welcome." It seemed feeble.

"I have a question for you, if I may."

"Shoot."

The drell looked confused.

Oops. Alien assassin, here. "Er, ask away."

"After you spoke with Mouse, you said something." His voice had an odd prosody as his perfect
memory took over. "You turned away, boots thumping on the ward floor. Garrus is confused. He
stops. The tissue pulses under his scar. I ask how you feel about Mouse. You nod, your eyes are
warm brown, with golden lights. Serious, gaze far away. A low voice, words I do not understand:
'There but for fortune...'

Shepard rocked back a little in her chair. She found the drell's eidetic memory unsettling under
normal circumstances; it took on new levels of discomfort when he was observing her. He had
sharper hearing than she'd thought, too, to have heard her mutter.

She shrugged aside the awkward feeling and answered the implied question.

"The phrase is 'there but for fortune go I.' It's from a song, I think. Religious people would say
'there but for the grace of God go I.'" She sipped her coffee, feeling his unreadable gaze on her,
eyes inky black. "I was born on Earth, but I grew up a lot like Mouse. If I hadn't been recruited for
the Alliance, I'd probably be working for some small-time criminal myself, now." Or dead.

Thane cocked his head to one side. "I believe I see, then. It is good that you were able to find a
different path."

"It found me. I was running from it just as fast as I could go." She chuckled. "Literally. An
Alliance marine caught me and decided I'd make a good soldier. The navy offered three meals a
day and a bath. I was in."

"You had help, then. Connections, again. None of us arrive where we are without them."

"True. I didn't have many, but..."

"Which must make those you have even more valuable." Thane cocked his head to the side. "I
imagine you have quite the story." His silence invited her to fill it with words, but she just
shrugged, rising from the chair. "It's a long one."

"Of course, Commander. Thank you for your time."

"Any time, Thane. Best of luck with Kolyat. I was glad to help."

She'd been intending to talk to Garrus, but Thane's words resonated in her head, and she found
herself taking her re-filled coffee cup back up to her quarters. Connections.

Her work had always been her world. The break between her past on earth and her career as an
alliance marine had been a clean one; until an old acquaintance had shown up on the Citadel while she was hunting Saren and tried to black-mail her she had spoken to no-one from that life in over ten years.

*One connection, and I shot him.* She didn't feel guilty about it; Finch had been a rat, and he would have gnawed at her 'till she bled if she left him alive.

The next oldest connection was Geltz, the marine who'd caught her running from the authorities and sent her to the military instead of jail or social services. She didn't know what kind of maneuvering had gone on behind the scenes, but she'd gone from running with a gang and squatting in abandoned tenements to fitted with a biotic implant and in a fancy boarding school in less than two weeks, and she was pretty sure he was behind it.

On the street, she'd made her place and defended it, and looked down on the guys who wasted themselves fighting for no purpose but an adrenaline high. Still, violence was part of life, and a month didn't go by without some switchblade action, whether it was some new idiot trying to take her spot, an unwelcome advance, or someone trying to horn in on her littles.

She hadn't fit in at the boarding school.

They'd been on the verge of kicking her out when Geltz had shown up again. She'd been fighting, some preppy kid who acted all better than her and then didn't have the common sense to admit it when he was beaten. It wasn't the first time, either.

Geltz had said he wanted to talk about her future. She'd rushed his knees – they'd taken her knife away – and he'd flung her across the room.

Unlike the stupid kid, she knew when to knuckle under. That had been the start of regular hand-to-hand training, if you could call it that. The school hated it, but as long as Geltz could keep her energy directed, they let it slide.

They had never been exactly close; he showed up at her graduation ceremonies, and they had lunch about once a year, when postings allowed it. Still, Geltz had been a mentor of sorts. He was the oldest acquaintance she had.

She sat at her terminal and opened a message window, unsure of what to say. The blank screen glowed at her balefully. "Hi, you may have heard I was dead..." It was like living a cheap vid-drama.

The confused rage she'd felt as a teen confined in a totally unfamiliar environment felt a lot like the baseless anger that had led her to lash out at Liara. Now she was trying to write to the man who'd helped beat it out of her. *It's all circles.* Thane had been right. Those with the fewest connections should value them most, and Liara was another one she shouldn't lose so easily. She changed the address of the message and typed out an apology to the asari.

When she looked up, thinking, her gaze fell on a flash of bright lime green: Joker's cocktail umbrella. She'd tucked the stick into a cranny on the SR2 model above her desk. Hell knew her cabin needed the color, and looking at it made her smile. She hadn't broken all of her connections, and it was never too late to make new ones. *Or make old ones stronger.*

Heartened, she sent the letter to Liara and started writing her old instructor.

—

The retrofit was still in progress on their third day at the Citadel, but Shepard wasn't sitting idle.
Garrus had received word that Sidonis, the man who sold out his squad, was being hidden by an ex-cop called Harken, and she went along to help track him down.

Shepard stood by while Garrus shot Harken in the kneecap. Stopping him would have been rank hypocrisy – hell, she'd shot Conrad Verner in the foot just for being annoying – and Harken would heal just fine in C-sec custody.

Still, when the time came to step away from Sidonis and let Garrus take his shot, she couldn't do it. It wasn't just that the miserable turian was clearly no threat to anyone but himself. She didn't like what she saw her friend becoming.

She'd shot Dr. Saleon two years ago because his guilt was as clear as day: the mindless subjects of his unethical experiments had been trying to kill her the entire time they were on his ship. Garrus had taken that bit of frontier justice as his model for his no-holds-barred vigilantism, and she hadn't been around to talk him out of it.

She just liked to make sure the bad guys couldn't hurt anyone again, but Garrus, he was after justice. Justice is such a hazily defined concept. Right now it looks a lot like revenge.

The lesson he'd learned hadn't been the one she meant to teach, but she'd set him on his path, and she was responsible for setting him straight.

How much does he want Sidonis dead? She could almost feel the laser sights of Garrus's sniper rifle burning into the back of her skull as she moved to keep herself between the mark and his position. Garrus was up there weighing a live friend against a dead enemy. It wasn't a position you should put your friends in. It isn't a position you should put yourself in.

She didn't breathe easily even when Garrus told her to let Sidonis walk away. She more than half expected to see him fall as soon as he stepped away from her, but Garrus hadn't lied. He held his fire.

They spoke briefly on the taxi ride back to the Normandy. A conversation I should have started years ago, Shepard thought. Still, it was better late than never, and it soothed her soul to hear the turian admit that not all morality was black and white.

"I don't know what to do with gray."

All her attention was on her team-mate, and she barely kept herself from jumping when she heard Joker's voice in her earpiece. "If shades of gray are this confusing for him, don't tell him about the other colors. What'll he do with shades of taupe?"

She made a strangled sound halfway between an attentive 'mmm?' and a quelling growl. Luckily, Garrus took it as sympathetic frustration.

The cheeky voice in her ear asked "Ecru?"

Shepard lit up her omnitool and killed the Normandy's feed, meeting Garrus's confused glance with a shrug. "Glitch."

---

Oops. I'm in trouble. Joker could tell by the sound of Shepard's combat boots on the deck plating that she was not happy, but he couldn't shake the feckless feeling that had come over him when Garrus finally stopped training his rifle on the commander's head. Despite the danger, Joker was pleased that she'd saved the guy's life. The day before he'd watched her play bad-cop to help
another team-member, the drell assassin, and seeing her coolly rough up their unwilling informant had made his stomach turn.

_I told Kaidan she was the same old Shepard, but he would have been disgusted by that little scene._ Shepard played the role of the brute well, appearing supremely unconcerned about whether her victim lived or died. The man had finally lost his nerve when she pulled a switchblade from somewhere on her armor and ran her thumb suggestively along the open edge. Luckily the rest of that mission had been as noble (and bloodless) as their former comrade could possibly want.

He spun around as she came to a stop, arms crossed.

"That was not helpful," she growled.

"What?"

"You know damn well. That little interior-decor act."

He shrugged. "I plead nerves. Garrus looked like his trigger finger was twitchy."

Her stony expression softened. "I'd rather not have his moral quandary end with my brains on the floor, either."

That was unnecessarily graphic. "Why so protective of this one turian, anyway?"

"Because I'd rather not have my friend turn into something as bad as he's fighting."

"I meant the _other_ turian."

"And I answered you." She uncrossed her arms and walked up beside him, long fingers dancing over her omnitool. "Here, I have something to show you." She shoved her arm at him.

"You could just send it to the console, Commander."

She shook her head almost imperceptibly. Right. Their omnitools were personal equipment, not linked directly to the Normandy's the mainframes. She wanted whatever it was hush-hush.

He leaned over her arm to read the glowing display and his eyebrows rose. Unexplained power surges. Approximately the same level, occurrence sporadic, but never during the first shift's watch, the crew for the Normandy's artificial 'day'. _Someone's sneaking around while it's quiet._

He opened his mouth to ask a question, thought better of it, and flicked open a new note space, typing "where's it draw to?" in the air above her arm. She read it as he wrote, and shrugged, then pulled up a saved message. It was marked with Tali's signature, and detailed apparently extensive rerouting protocols that were hiding the true function of the power surge.

He shook his head and looked Shepard in the eye. "You lose your hamster already, Commander? You only had it two days."

Her mouth twitched in a smile. "There are a lot of places to hide on a ship this size."

"He can't stay hidden forever. We'll track the little bugger down eventually."

She nodded. "Keep your eyes open. We'll be leaving the Citadel tomorrow, and I don't want any surprises."

"Really? Damn. Now what will I do with all those party hats?"
"Save 'em for a special occasion, Joker."

"Will do, Commander."

"And what kind of color is taupe, anyway?"

"Brownish. I think."

EDI chimed in. "A dark grayish brown. The word 'taupe' comes from the latin scientific name for the European mole, a burrowing earth creature which –"

Shepard held up her hands. "Okay, okay, I get it, thanks EDI." She started backing away.

"Oh sure, leave me with the talking encyclopedia ball," Joker grumbled. Shepard grinned and retreated back to the CIC.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter would have been far, far worse without the help of TeraDanielle.

Regarding Joker's therapy: I'm trying to find a reasonable medium between my limited knowledge of current OI, the tech they should have in the ME universe, and the symptoms you actually see in game.

I adore critique. Give it to me. Be brutal.
Chapter Summary

Official reprimands, unofficial rewards, and the Beatles.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

XO Lawson was at the CIC as they left the Citadel, snapping unnecessary commands and generally being even more irritated and *irritating* than usual. When Shepard came forward to check on things later that morning, Joker asked her about it.

“What kinda bug's got up Miranda's butt now?”

She shot him a quelling look and shook her head. “She's wrestling with some very tough questions right now.” She sounded almost sympathetic, but he caught the hint of a twinkle in her eye.

“How so?”

The commander leaned back against the copilot's seat, serious expression still in place. “Over the last few days, she's decided that I'm quite possibly crazy, which leaves her with one of two conclusions: either the Illusive Man made a poor decision in reviving me, or she made a mistake in the process. Neither are ideas she's comfortable with.”

“She's forgetting option three: no one sane could accomplish the shit you have.”

“Your 'pro-insanity' vote is noted, helmsman,” Shepard said wryly.

“Hey, it was a vote of confidence! What made her realize – “ he smirked at her, “I mean, *think* you're nuts?”

“Started a few days ago. We were discussing something serious, and she kept looking at me like I'd grown horns.” Shepard's eyes twinkled. “Didn't realize 'til I used the head later that I still had that umbrella in my hair.”

Joker snorted. “They forget to install her *fun* chromosome when they were genetically engineering her?”

“Be nice, Joker. The fun-impaired deserve our sympathy, not our derision.”

“Nah, I'm cool, the derision is because of the part where she's a bitch.”

“Joker.” That quelling look again. “You know it would be unprofessional for me to say things like that about my crew.”

Which was about as clear an agreement as he could get, really, and also a warning to drop it. “So, what's the deal with this dirt-ball we're aiming for?”
“There's a tiny merc outpost there, looks to be involved in piracy. The Council wants it quietly dealt with.”

Joker rolled his eyes to show what he thought of the Council's wishes.

“It's a chance for some relatively safe action, and we need the practice. More importantly, it'll give you a chance to get the feel for the new armor. There's an asteroid belt in-system – I want you to run the obstacle course, take her into a few gravity wells and back. Make sure this retrofit doesn't give us any surprises.”

“Aye aye, Commander.”

“And you've probably seen the message to the flight crew regarding mandatory conditioning. Don't worry, I told Jacob he's to leave you out of it.”

Well, that was one awkward conversation he didn't have to have. He'd gotten enough of the 'did you bring a note from your medical officer?' crap to last his lifetime. “Thank god. Have you seen that man work?”

“Yeah. When I put him in charge of getting the flight crew in shape I had to remind him that I wanted 'em all alive at the end of it.” She rolled her eyes. “You're not excused from target practice, though.”

He did his best to look frightened. “Can I at least be in a different shift from the civilians? Not sure they know which end is which.”

“Aw, I'd thought you want to show 'em how it's done.”

“Well, if they want to learn how to break their collarbones with the recoil, I'm your man.”

Shepard was taken aback. “What'd the navy have you train with? An assault rifle?” He nodded, and she shook her head in evident frustration. “That was stupid. You'd do better with a pistol.” Coming from her, it was uncommonly strong criticism of the Alliance.

He muttered something about a girly little gun.

Her answering grin was predatory. “Like the girly little gun your commander uses?” She pulled the carnifex out of her thigh pocket, slapping the barrel of the chunky pistol into her other palm. He hunkered back in his chair.

“What, did I say something, Commander? Didn't say anything, lips sealed. Must have been EDI. And, er, is there a type of gun you don't use?”

She grinned. “Sniper rifles, but I'm going to get Garrus or Thane to teach me. For you, well, pistol's a better weapon for someone who's mostly shipboard anyway. We'll work on it.” She straightened up. “Keep me posted on how the Normandy handles.”

“Will do. Retrofits are always a pain in the ass.”

She lifted a hand to her cheek, lightly touching one of the scars left by the Lazarus project. “Tell me about it. See ya, Joker.”

—

Joker watched the readouts as the drop-shuttle fell away, entering atmo only to be buffeted by the
small-world's constant gale-force winds.

"Mercer! Bring her nose around, you have to compensate for that wind!" He winced as the Kodiak over-corrected and jounced again. "Damn it, Mercer, you're not hauling freight, here!"

*Should have left her to watch the Normandy in orbit and taken 'em down myself.*

His hands twitched with desire to be at the Kodiak's helm. Instead, he watched helplessly as the Cerberus pilot maneuvered clumsily through the storm and dropped to ground in a billow of dust.

---

The merc base proved as easy to clean-out as Shepard had guessed; she, Zaeed, and Garrus returned almost as full of energy as when they'd left, and spent the shuttle ride back complaining about the planet's weather. Joker grimaced; the return trip was just as choppy as the ride down, and he once again found himself shouting frustrated instructions into the comm.

He was totally unprepared for Shepard's first words when she came to see him after the mission.

"Would it kill you to give Mercer a positive comment once in awhile?"

"What, after displays like that?" He was taken aback. "Sorry, Commander, I didn't realize you liked getting the 'shaken, not stirred' treatment."

"Conditions on that rock were terrible, and she got us through it with barely a bump."

*I would have gotten you through it in style. I could have ridden that wind.*

"I give her constructive criticism."

"Bullshit. I *do* listen to her radio channel. There's a world of difference between constructive crit and haranguing."

Shepard had never, *ever* complained of his performance of his job. Not once. He was shocked and defensive, and his mouth ran away with him.

"I may have mentioned it once or twice, Commander, but in case you forgot, I'm *not* a people person. I have no subordinates and the loneliest job on the ship for a reason. I'll leave the compliments to you."

"Joker," Shepard's voice held a hint of warning, "Like it or not, you're her de facto supervisor. She needs to hear she's capable, and she needs to hear it *from you.*"

He'd seen Shepard fed up before, but never at him. Too late to back down now.

"I was under the impression we needed people to be a bit more than 'capable'."

"She'd be better if she wasn't second-guessing herself all the time. You have that kid twitchier than a three-legged pyjak in a varren den."

He scowled and opened his mouth to retort, but Shepard wasn't done.

"We both know you're a better pilot than she'll ever be. That's irrelevant. I need everyone operating at their peak, and no one reaches that through constant criticism." She crossed her arms. "You *will* find a genuinely positive thing to remark on in Mercer's performance, or you're restricted to decaf."
His mouth dropped open. "What, you want your pilot to get the shakes?"

Shepard raised one eyebrow and turned to go. "Up to you, isn't it?" She turned to head back to the CIC.

"Hard ass."

"Damn right." She slapped herself on that same well-muscled ass, shot a cool glance over her shoulder, and strode away.

Well, shit.

It's not like he'd never been reprimanded by a commander before.

Yeah, but never by Shepard.

Every one of Mercer's stumbles paraded through his head. There's a knack to flight and she doesn't have it.

In the past he'd have accepted the rebuke, complained about it later, and followed the letter of the order... if not the spirit. But Shepard was different. He owed her.

Who're you fooling, man? That's not the issue. It's different because you actually give a shit what she thinks about you. And she's pissed. She wasn't even pissed when you killed her.

Joker's eyes roamed restlessly over the haptic interface in front of him, wishing desperately to explain it to her. His connection with the ship went beyond knowing how to read the tech charts. He saw the complex numbers in front of him and knew what the Normandy felt, without pause for translation. How the hell did you teach someone fluency?

The only other experience that compared was studying piano, before he'd quit to piss off his mom. When you looked at notes on a page, you didn't stop and count staff lines, translate it to "C#" and then count down black keys 'till you found the right one. You just saw the dot on the page and played it.

Mercer was still referencing the cheat-sheet at every move.

And forget about improv. She can't get off the book. She'll freeze if she ever has to play jazz.

He tried to imagine explaining that to Shepard. He growled and ran his hand over his face. If he was lucky, she'd just tease him about having ever played piano. If he was unlucky, it'd be worse than a coffee ban.

He desperately wanted back in her good graces. He'd never been out of them before, and it made him realize just how fantastic their working relationship had always been. You'd think you would've realized that when you killed her, jackass. Knowing she was displeased with him stung in an entirely different way than knowing she was gone.

He mentally kicked himself for saying anything to Mercer at all. He replayed his conversation with Shepard in his head, wincing.

"We both know you're a better pilot than she'll ever be."

He hadn't really caught the compliment in the moment, just the tone of voice. He tried to remember if she'd ever said anything like that before. You were too busy blowing your own horn to give her a
reason to. But Shepard wanted him at the helm, and not just because Cerberus had saddled her with him. Better pilot than she'll ever be.

He remembered talking to her in the darkened observation deck after her nightmare, telling her to get over herself. And she'd let him get away with it, which he had no right to expect. Because she thought I was right.

Is she right?

He thought back over his conversations, if you could call them that, with Mercer. Maybe he had been a little harsh. Enough to screw up her performance? Hell, I've only ever gotten taken to task once, and I'm falling apart. Looks like Shepard and Mercer both have me beat.

"EDI, pull up the shuttle logs for the last ten drops. I hafta find something to like about Mercer before breakfast tomorrow."

–––

Hours later, Shepard sat at the desk in her cabin, completing the more mundane tasks of command.

She stretched before turning back to the duty roster. Setting the schedule herself had started as a way to quickly learn the Cerberus crew, but now she seemed stuck with the task. Normally personnel assignments would have been the XO's job, but the Illusive Man had placed Miranda in that position, and Miranda was the kind of person who got under the skin of those beneath her and caused them to do worse, rather than better. And she considers everyone beneath her.

Hell, Joker was better with people, and he looked to be driving his relief pilot to a mental breakdown.

She'd read his defensive expression like a book; she gave him three days before he caved. Maybe more. The caffeine-withdrawal headache would probably make him cranky, which wasn't exactly good for rational problem solving. Should have picked a different threat.

It wasn't uncommon for people who were very talented at what they did to be impatient with those who hadn't reached their level. It had been discussed at various points in her training; even the elite special forces personnel had to be able to lead a squad, and you couldn't do that if you were dazzled by the shine of your own N7 insignia. It had never been a problem for Rhi; leadership had come naturally to her, but then, she'd guided those weaker than herself for years before she'd ever put on Alliance dog-tags. She liked to see her team do well.

Hopefully it wouldn't take three days. She didn't want Joker upset with her, but she couldn't let that interfere with doing her job. Poor Mercer deserved better.

“EDI, where is sub-helmsman Mercer?”

“In the cockpit, in conversation with Helmsman Moreau.”

“What?” There was no way he'd followed her order that quickly, not Joker. He'd have to dig his heels in and come up with a list of snappy comebacks first. “Pull up the cockpit vid.”

Sure enough, Mercer was sitting in the copilot's chair, blond head leaning towards Joker's console as he gestured to something on the screen. Shepard turned up the volume and had EDI send her an image of what they were looking at. Flight diagrams for the kodiak flashed across her screen, accompanied by images of a shuttle drop. Onto Korlus, she thought.
She pulled the volume up a little more.

“You drive dirtside, Mercer, or in a big station?”

“Uh, yeah, why?”

“You know how you drive way out in front of the car, or else the steering's jerky? It's just like that, only with a lot more variables. If you want a smooth ride, you can't react to the thing that's happening now. You have to be a few jumps ahead.”

“...see, that? That was good. Very good. That's the kind of pre-action you should aim for all the time.” The shuttle image jumped backward as he replayed the clip. It all looked the same to Shepard, but presumably it meant something to them.

Wow. Compliment first, then constructive advice. *Color me surprised.* She would have settled for grudging toleration. Shepard leaned back in her seat, watching the screen with a growing smile. She was absurdly proud that he was doing this so well. She loved seeing people learn to work together, and knowing she didn't have to be upset with Joker was an added relief.

Still, she had work to do, and the two pilots might have been speaking in elcor pheromones for all she understood of their conversation. She was still smiling when she turned off the vid, turned up her music, and forced herself back to the roster.

___

Joker pulled himself out of bed twenty minutes before he was due on deck, bleary eyed. In the showers he grunted a pre-caffeine good morning at Rolston and turned the water as hot as it went. He wanted it scalding in case it had to stand in for his coffee fix.

He'd done more than Shepard asked, but he hadn't mentioned it to her and she hadn't been around to see it. *If a tree falls in the forest, and your commander isn't around to hear...*

Clean, he headed to the mess, wondering whether it was worth an argument with Gardner. He almost stopped in his tracks when he saw Shepard leaning against the counter, sipping a giant mug of steaming coffee.

*I am not going to whine 'but I diiiid it!' like a kid with chores in front of the entire crew.*

He walked toward the kitchen, head down to hide his frown behind the brim of his hat, and greeted her with a terse “morning, Commander.”

“Good morning, Joker.” He could hear the smile in her voice. “I think this is for you.” She reached behind her on the counter and handed him another steaming mug.

*So she did notice.* He buried his face in it, inhaling the elixir of life, and then looked up at her in surprise. Gardner hadn't made this. The cook made standard ship coffee, which was too damn weak by half. This was waking him up with aroma alone.

Shepard winked. “Gardner never makes it strong enough. Sometimes I get fed up and beat him down here.”

It even had the right amount of sugar in it. “This isn't even the same coffee.”

“Personal supply.” She narrowed her eyes. “Don't ask where I keep it: need-to-know basis only.”
“There's a security clearance I want.”

She looked down her nose at him. “Command hath it's privileges, helmsman.”

“So doth access to the illusive man's credit chit.”

She chuckled. “That too,” she pushed off the counter, headed to the battery. “Let me know how the armor's working out.”

He tossed off a salute, mouth too full of coffee to respond, then he had to scramble to get to the cockpit – he'd set his alarm late on purpose, hoping to avoid an awkward scene in the mess. Obvious now he needn't have worried. Alone in the elevator, he grinned into his coffee mug, happy to be firmly back in Shepard's good graces and glad that she hadn't made a big deal out of it. And how many people can say their commander made them coffee?

He was about to sit down at his station when EDI interrupted him. Well, there goes a surprisingly good morning. “What now, Thing?”

“In my observation of your behavior, I have noted that you do not appreciate surprises, Mr. Moreau.”

The computer infestation monitoring his behavior would never not be creepy. Never. “Uh, yeah? Especially not from you.” He looked warily around the cockpit as if some part of it might explode with confetti. Or just explode.

“The commander spent some time here before you woke up this morning.”

“Doing…?” She was probably just checking vid logs to see what he'd said to Mercer.

“I am not at liberty to say.”

“Gee, thanks, worse-than-useless!” He rolled his eyes. “Shut it, thing, some of us have work to do.”

The second his butt hit the leather seat the cockpit speakers came to life, filling the area with the sound of old electric guitars.

The fuck? He missed the first lyrics in the scramble not to spill his precious coffee, but then the music crescendo-ed and the chorus came through loud and clear:

Baby, you can drive my car!

You can drive… oh, shit, Shepard. I get it, I'm not in trouble. He didn't know whether to laugh or hide, and he almost spilled his coffee again. Damn, EDI is not going to like being referred to as a car. How far away can they hear this –

Yes, I'm going to be a star –

“What the hell!!”

A quick glance behind him showed Matthews craning his head to try to see what was going on, Rolston staring toward the cockpit with his mouth open, and Kelly bearing down on them from the CIC with a look of determined curiousity. Oh, shit, shit, shit, Shepard! Joker's rising embarassment couldn't quite overwhelm the appreciation he had for a well-pulled prank.

Baby, you can drive my car –
He'd known he was in the clear when she gave him coffee. This was ridiculous… but that didn't stop him grinning like an idiot. Knowing the Commander wasn't angry with him was a huge weight off his heart.

It took him three tries to turn the volume down, just in time for the last line of the chorus.

– and baby, I love you.

Joker stared at his console for a moment, as if he could find an explanation for his Commander's behavior in the Normandy's speed and vector data. She wanted him to know she wasn't angry with him – in the most embarassing way possible – sure. But was she trying to let him know anything else?

The spark of attraction he'd first smothered after that crazy exit from Therum two years ago was burning brightly in his chest.

Granted, he hadn't been doing nearly as good a job of keeping it locked up lately. Not since she'd come back from the dead. Not since their easy working relationship had started to grow into real friendship – then he shook his head. They were friends. Friends tease. That's all it was. She hadn't listened to the whole song she'd picked, clearly. Or just hadn't cared. Clever quotes or song snippets never fit a situation in it's entirety, after-all. The only other explanation was flirtatious, and it was Shepard. Competent, famous, even-the-turian-is-staring-at-her-ass war-hero Shepard.

She probably didn't even realize there was another way to take her joke.

He was more comfortable having figured that out, the spark shoved back down where it couldn't distract him. Joker turned back to the report he was working up for Tali with new concentration, thinking of ways he could spin Shepard's joke into a new taunt at EDI. The AI was not going to like hearing the Normandy referred to as a car.

Chapter End Notes

"Baby, You Can Drive My car" is by the Beatles, of course. If you didn't know that, get thyself a proper musical education post haste.
"Tali, you’ll head the EVA team. Pick your work crew. Taylor, you’re look-out,” Shepard tapped the side of her head, “And our biotic tether. If there’s any accidents I want to see you pull ‘em back before they even have time to realize their boots aren’t latched.”

“Aye aye, Commander.”

Shepard watched the second team head into the airlock, then went to her terminal in the CIC.

There was nothing strange about the commander staying safely aboard during a ship repair.

Nothing strange at all.

Regulation procedure, actually.

It wasn’t the CO’s job to go outside the ship and fix things. No one expected her to be out there.

"Oh, damn it," she said under her breath, and went to suit up.

She returned to the CIC and made purposefully for the airlock. Joker glanced briefly away from his diagnostics, and she thought she saw concern in his eyes, but then Tali radioed and his attention went back to their work.

Shepard checked her helmet seals and stepped into the airlock. She had to do this sooner or later.

Now was the safest chance she’d get.

She had to know she could do this.

She activated the mag boots and pulled up one heel, testing the resistance, firmly shutting out the feeling that when the airlock cycled open, she’d be sucked outward into space.

It wasn’t a big deal. She'd known how to do this since she was nineteen.

The door opened, and she stepped forward, grabbed the bar, and swung herself onto the hull of the Normandy.

Only she didn't.

She hadn't moved a muscle.

She'd thought about it a second too long, and in that time her body had said, "No."

Oh, fuck this.

In that moment she honestly wasn't scared. Frustrated, yes, but her heart didn't beat faster in her chest, her mind was on the job at hand, and intellectually she knew that what she was trying to do
was far less dangerous than most of the situations she threw herself into on the ground.

But her subconscious remembered how she'd died, and it wasn't having any of it.

She tried breaking it down into little pieces. First things first. Move your foot.

Nopex

Breaking it into steps meant thinking about the moment when both feet had to unlatch from the floor, when only her grip on the bar would keep her from drifting in space. There were ways to transfer from the plane she stood to one perpendicular without losing the security of the boots, but they were ungainly at best. She couldn’t let the crew see her less than capable.

Shit. They were probably watching her hesitate now, on vid. Couldn’t have that.

She’d always found it easiest to be strong when there were people relying on her. This wasn’t any different.

Don’t think about it. Just go. Count on your body to remember. In one quick motion she strode to the edge of the floor, reached for the grab-bar above her head, released her feet, and smoothly pulled herself up onto the hull of the Normandy.

This time, she actually did it, and felt the solid pull as the electromagnets in her boots activated, latching her to the metal super-structure that surrounded the ship's pressure-hull.

She looked only at the hull beneath her feet, but she could feel the vast emptiness all around. She pulled her gaze up, aft to where the crew was working, tiny toy figures in the uncanny silence of space.

The dead quiet almost overwhelmed her, and she felt her breathing speed up. She almost caved – please, Joker, someone, talk to me – but instead she turned her earpiece to the work-crew's radio channel, and the silence dissolved into comm chatter.

She picked her way along the struts, the distance feeling longer than it would have inside. The smooth sheets of armor to either side of her shone in the light of the stars, but they weren't ferrous and offered no security for her boots.

She automatically counted heads. Three, four – shit. Where was Jacob? She was only looking at half the team. They'd clearly split to work on both port and starboard at once – not something she would have given the go-ahead for if she'd been doing her job instead of wrestling with her own issues, damn it – but if he was doing his job properly he'd be easy to see, high on the center of the ship where he could keep an eye on everybody.

“Taylor, report.”

“Just catching some equipment, ma’am – a welder almost got away. I’m on the starboard side, low.”

“People are more important than tools, Taylor. Never leave that position unless you’re saving someone’s ass. Everyone else, you know damn well to keep your gear rigged to your suit. If anything’s loose, fix that now. If something goes flying it comes out of your pay.” In the military she would have taken it out of their hide and made them thank her for it, but Cerberus had a more fiscal bent. When in Rome...

She heard a chorus of “aye ayes”, one terrified “Sorry!” and a sudden “FUCK!”
She'd kept her eyes glued to the port-side team as she approached, slipping into the role Jacob had abandoned, so she saw the tool fly from Hawthorne's hand as he made too much haste to follow her command.

Patel had been reaching for something; one foot was on the solid struts, but the other was up on a piece of armor, her hands gripping the edge. She jerked away as the loose tool flew at her. The panicked lurch was enough to break the hold of her remaining boot and send her spinning helplessly away from the Normandy.

Out into the field of stars.

Out into the silence.

The radio was awash with shouts and curses, an audio blur that Shepard didn't hear. The rush of adrenaline that flooded her washed away everything but the sight of Patel's body against the stars. She acted on reflex, falling back on the techniques she'd practiced a thousand times in combat. The mass field sprang into being near Patel and sped back towards the commander, pulling the woman along with it.

Patel flew back so fast that she slammed into Shepard's chest. Rhi had been ready, knees bent and arms open, and she rocked with the motion instead of losing her grip herself. She grabbed Patel before she could rebound, righted her, and felt the thunk as her boots secured themselves once more. Patel's breaths through the radio were fast, dangerously close to hyperventilating. Her own breathing was only a bit better.

Patel hadn't even had time to scream.

"PATEL! Look at me, NOW! The rest of you, CAN IT."

Patel's eyes snapped up, seeking Shepard's through the dimness of their faceplates.

Shepard kept her grip on Patel's shoulders steady. "Breathe with me, slowly." She drew breath through her mouth, loudly, so the radio would pick it up, then released it the same way. Patel's breath jerked once, then matched hers. "Feel your feet on the hull. There's no harm done, and you have a job to do." Patel nodded. "Now, go back and finish what you started."

Rhi followed Patel back to her post. "That's enough excitement for today, people."

She stood, arms crossed, on the outside of her ship, without ever raising her gaze to the stars.

Shepard waited on the platform of the CIC in a strict parade-rest, her face stern as she watched the repair team assemble before her for their well-earned reaming.

Tali stood at the head of the team she'd assembled. Good for you, Tal, Rhi thought, but she didn't let it show in her face. She'd talk to the quarian after she'd gotten this over with. Taylor stood at the back, in a parade rest matching Shepard's own; he knew exactly what was coming. The rest of the team either copied them or shifted back and forth, restless and uncertain. She could probably pick out who'd served in the Alliance just by how they stood. When Patel showed up, still looking shaky, Shepard tersely sent her to the med bay.

Rhi didn't pull any punches with her lecture. She detailed not just the mistakes that had lead to the accident, but a half dozen other things she'd noticed while she stood watch over the port crew for the hours it took to complete the task, calling out who made them, when, and exactly what terrible
consequences they were practically begging for by doing something so unmitigatedly stupid.

The CIC crew kept their attention firmly on their own tasks, fearful of catching her ire. The first time she caught one of the repair team glancing sideways, he got a full minute of personal attention. No one else dared take their eyes off of her after that.

Finally, she dismissed them, ordered Tali to meet her in her quarters in half an hour, and headed down to check on Patel.

The doctor had already dismissed her into the care of yeoman Chambers, and in the privacy of the med-bay Chakwas didn't mince her words.

“Your… over exuberance… gave Patel quite the case of whiplash. She was also in shock. Why didn't you send her inside, Commander?”

Rhi leaned back on an examining table, arms crossed in front of her. “How long will it take the strain to heal, doc?”

“A week, perhaps.”

“And how long do you think it would have taken her to get up the nerve to work outside again, if she'd been rushed back in like it was an emergency?”

The doctor looked at her levelly for a long moment, then murmured “Understood, Commander.”

Chakwas was good at reading between the lines. Rhi was grateful; it spared her the burden of explaining how she'd experienced the same fear she wished to spare Patel. She didn't think she could put it into words just then; giving a lecture worthy of her old drill instructor on top of the rest of the days events had left her emotionally drained, though she couldn't let it show.

She was only in her cabin for three minutes when Tali showed up, exactly on time as always. Rhi turned in her chair, waited for the door to close, and wearily said, “Sorry, Tal. You had to get it with everyone else.”

“No, it’s my fault, I never thought, of course I should have, but quarians —“

“Have zero-g safety drilled into them since they were infants, I know. I should have remembered that.” She scrubbed a hand over her brow. “We both learned a few things today about making assumptions.”

Tali nodded morosely. “I didn't even think about the risk of splitting the teams. I did check all of their files to see that they'd been cleared for open-space work, but…”

Shepard shook her head. “There's clearance and then there's experience. Some of the things I saw today were baby stuff – either their instructors weren't all that hot or it's been awhile since they actually did that kind of work.” Taylor, for instance, had received the same basic training Shepard had, but for her, the alliance was a career; he'd only stuck it out for a few years. It was likely he'd never even used the training he received. “It's okay, Tali. We know better now, right?”

“I don't think I'm really cut out for leadership, Shepard.” Tali sounded miserable, and Rhi thought back to the lost quarian team on Haestrom.

She stood up and put her hands on Tali’s shoulders, grounding her the same way she had Patel.

“There's nothing wrong with that.” Rhi smiled and squeezed her shoulders. “It's just another skill,
and we don't all have the same skill-set, thank goodness. If you had my engineering ability we'd be down on a planet somewhere trying to get pack animals to pull the *Normandy*.”

“But, being a leader…”

“Just another skill.”

“But I could get people killed!”

“You could get people killed through an engineering mistake, too, but you *won't*, because you're good at it. As long as you're on my ship, it's my job to make sure you're doing what you're good at. If I put you in the wrong position, that's *my fault*. Also, even if you're not comfortable as a leader, you're a good boss. Donnelly may be too much of an ass to tell, but I think he likes working for you. I know Gabby does.”

“Really?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Thank you, Shepard. I just keep thinking of the people I lost on Haestrom, and…”

“I know, Tali, I know.” Shepard hugged her. “Go get some rest, okay?”

——

Joker yawned. The last of his tweaking and tests were done – at least for tonight. The majority of the crew had slept soundly as he slid the *Normandy* in and out of orbit, testing her responses with the modified armor. However poorly the actual re-install had gone, Tali's team had fixed the balance issue. *Good thing, too.* If there'd still been a problem, the quarian would probably be out there now trying to fix it herself.

His stomach grumbled, reminding him that he'd worked straight through dinner.

Gardner had probably left him a tray of food –and Grunt had probably eaten it. It was practically tradition by now. Oh well. Fixing himself dinner wasn't a bad way to wind-down after a hard day. He loved flying, but – he checked his omnitool – *fourteen hours* of tweaking technical minutia would give anyone a headache.

He was surprised to find Shepard in the mess, digging through Gardner's disorganized cabinets.

“You're up late.”

She glanced around to see the deck was empty before she answered. “Nightmares.”

He made a sympathetic noise, and she continued, an edge of frustration in her voice.

“Thought I'd dealt with some of the crap today when I made myself go outside, but – ”

He saw her hand shake, bumping the glass she'd gotten out, and he caught it before it hit the floor.

“*Dammit.*” She placed both hands flat on the counter, very firmly, and stared at them. Daring them to shake again.

“Two steps forward, one step back,” he said quietly as he replaced the glass.

She hung her head. “More like the other way around.”
“Just feels that way.” He leaned back against the counter, facing out towards the darkened med-bay to avoid her eyes. “Recovery’s like that. The second time I learned to walk…” He couldn’t believe the words had left his mouth. He never talked about this pathetic shit. It was his pathetic shit, and no one else needed to know. He gulped and took a deep breath. “Anyway, it was like that. Frustrating, but you get through it eventually.”

He didn’t mention the third time. Twice was enough for anybody.

“Aren’t you going to tell me to pull myself together or something?”

“Nope.” He’d said that once, sure, but then she’d been acting as if a little unresolved psychological trauma was going to stop her from doing her job, and it obviously wasn’t.

He heard her slowly take and release a breath, felt the change in tension as she straightened up and locked the frustration away.

“Thanks, Joker,” she said quietly.

“What were you looking for, anyway?”

“Don’t know. Snack. Something warm, preferably.” She shivered. “I forgot that Gardner's been stocking less of the insta-heat stuff since we found nicer ingredients.”

Joker shrugged. “Good trade, though, right? The grub’s way better. Even if Grunt ate mine.” he turned around and started his own rummage. “Wow, this is a mess. How does he find anything?”

He pushed an institutional-sized can of tomatoes out of the way to reveal a packet of crackers, three fresh limes, and a box of plastic forks. “It's totally random.”

“You didn't stop for chow, did you?”

“Busy. Recalibrating after all the outdoor excitement. Pain in the butt, but I think we're good to go.” He pulled a tub of blended eggs out of the cooler. “Don't give me that look. I sit on my ass all day. Regular meals just aren’t as important as they are for you hyper-metabolizing physical types.”

“Regular meals are the hallmark of civilization,” her voice was muffled; she'd stuck her head into the locker where the despised ration bars were. “Just a lunch away from barbarism and all that.”

“Shit, those things are gross, leave ‘em. There's enough here to make something better. Once you find it, I mean.”

“Make? You saw the beginning, middle, and end of my culinary expertise this morning.” She chuckled. “Anything more advanced than pulling the heat-tab on a cup-noodle is beyond me.”

Was that really this morning? After the day they'd had the coffee reward felt like last week. He felt a stupid grin creep across his face, but he stifled it before he turned to face her. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Why? Actually, adding sugar stretched my abilities.”

“I thought you knew how to fend for yourself. Didn't you tell Donnelly you ate a rat?”

“I did.”

“Not raw!?”

“I burnt it.”
“Damn, Commander, that's kinda pathetic.” He turned back to the cooler, pulling out an onion and – “Is this disinfectant?” Without really thinking about it, he started grabbing enough for two.

He slopped eggs into a bowl. “You could at least get the things from the tall shelves for me.”

She glanced at him sidelong. "I'm not that much taller than you."

He'd always been grateful that his mom's family was tall; despite the breaks and the bone malformation, he'd almost managed to reach human-male-average. Shepard was… above average in many ways. It was easy to imagine that she towered over him, making his slightly-short stature even more glaring. He was usually sitting down, and Shepard had presence. Now that they stood side-by-side, he realized she was only taller by an inch, if that.

“I was thinking of biotics. What else are they good for?” Besides keeping people from being spaced, obviously.

Shepard stepped backward and leaned against the counter to peer into the upper shelf.

“I don't know,” she said uncertainly, “My control's just not that good. The way he's got it packed, I'd be as likely to bring it all down on our heads as get what I was aiming for.”

As if to prove the point, a precariously balanced bag of freeze-dried potato flakes fell out of the cabinet and landed on the counter between them.

“Definitely having him re-stow all this in the morning.”

The potatoes started to shimmer with blue energy and rise off the counter, and Joker felt the hairs on his arm stand up. Hell, the hairs of his beard were sticking out. “Should I be able to feel that?”

“No. Damn.” The static-electricity feeling lessened, came back, and then disappeared altogether. The potatoes continued to float in the air.

Joker looked back curiously. Shepard's brow was creased in concentration, the hand at her side curled into a mnemonic.

He'd never really got how biotics worked. Oh, he knew the math – it was the same thing that made his ships fly, after all: he'd bet credits he had a better idea of what was going on with mass manipulation than Shepard did. But he couldn't imagine what it was like for the person doing it.

“You throw people around all the time. Why's this harder?”

“I'm good at big, violent things, but I'm trying not to explode the bag and spray you with fake potatoes.”

“They're not fake, they're… technologically altered. And would this be a biotic explosion, or just the kind that seems to naturally happen around you but you swear isn't your fault?”

“Someone's looking for a face full of potatoes.”

“Someone's making you your snack. Be nice.”

“Really?” She sounded far too delighted by that. The potatoes dropped to the counter again from a height of about three feet. “Oops.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I usually have better control than I did today. That was inexcusable. I'll have to work on it.”

“I doubt Patel minded, Commander.”
“She might mind a bit more tomorrow as she stiffens up. Doc says I gave her whiplash.”

“Yeah, but, y’know, she’s not dead. That’s something.”

“Still,” Shepard sighed, “I could have done better. If I hadn’t panicked –” her breath caught, apparently realizing what she’d just admitted.

*Nice to know I’m not the only one admitting embarrassing shit on accident tonight.* He turned and leaned against the counter next to her, so she didn’t have to meet his eyes. Or avoid them.

“To my knowledge, no one else has ever had to deal with post death-experience trauma. So you panicked. So what? You still did exactly the right thing. That’s some impressive panicking right there.”

“Maybe.” She sighed, “Damn, Joker, if you weren’t here –”

Her hand started to reach for his, but before she touched him she whirled away, grabbed something he couldn't see, pulled, and lunged towards the ground.

Her knee seemed to be hovering a few inches off the floor.

Kasumi Goto's tactical suit flickered partially off, revealing her cowled face lying against the deck-plating, her arm pulled back in a lock, and her back squarely under Shepard's knee.

“Don't do that,” Shepard said.

“Sorry,” Kasumi replied, brightly.

Shepard's moment of weakness had vanished under smooth calm. She dropped the lock and let the petite woman up.

Kasumi vaulted nimbly up to perch on the unused counter, settled herself, and asked, “Joker, why do you always wear that hat?”

He glanced upward. “To protect me from falling potatoes.”

Shepard nodded. “It's a valid concern.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Joker could see Kasumi cock her head to the side and look back and forth between them, evidently confused. He turned back to the counter, then grimaced and held up the paring knife.

“We're on a top-of-the-line stealth/combat frigate, and the cook doesn't keep his knives sharp. Go figure.”

“Trade you.” Shepard plucked it from his hand, holding up an opened switchblade in exchange. It was at least nine inches of razor edge and functional black plastic, and he hadn't even seen her pull it out.

“What's that?”

“Sharp.” She grinned, ferally. “Use it, I'll fix the other one.” She headed over to the equipment lockers and returned with an old-fashioned whetstone.

Kasumi peered around his shoulder. “Ooh, is that a switchblade? How romantic!” The thief looked like someone had given her a birthday present. *Or like she’s stolen one.*
His eyes met Shepard's over the thief's head. Her incredulous stare echoed his own.

“…romantic?” Shepard finally ventured.

“Pro-tip, Kasumi: when the marine thinks you're getting weird about knives? You are seriously getting weird about knives.” Joker turned back to his work.

That distracted Shepard from her astonished inspection of Kasumi. “I am not weird about knives.”

“Well, if you'd just tell us…” Shepard held up her hands. “Oh, no, no, don't let me stop you. You're doing so well. Very creative.”

“Sorry to interrupt the bonding moment,” Joker announced, “but food's hot.” He handed the commander a tray and headed towards the table with his own. The two women followed him.

He batted Kasumi's hand away as she reached towards his plate, idly wondering where she'd found the chopsticks.
“You're sharing with Shepard.”

“I was too pathetic to resist.” Shepard grinned. “This is really good, Joker.”

“I'd take that as a compliment if I didn't know you were perfectly happy eating cardboard-flavored ration bars.”

“Hey, just because food starts at 'good' doesn't mean I can't recognize better.”

“Yeah, but we're still talking a really low baseline here.” He shook his head. “I still can't believe that the ultra-competent Shepard can't cook.”

“You only think I'm ultra-competent because I'm careful not to show off what I suck at.”

Kasumi tried to snitch a bite from the commander's plate and got her knuckles rapped with a fork. “You really don't know how to cook?”

“I burnt a rat once,” Shepard said helpfully.

He couldn't see the thief's eyes, but her mouth twisted into a cute little grimace. “Charming.”

They were mostly done when a loud noise came from the direction of the lower decks. Shepard straightened, on immediate alert.

“EDI, report!”

“Grunt has just broken the window between his room and the hangar deck, Commander.”

“Reason?”

“I do not have enough data to venture a conjecture.”

“Better go check it out.” Shepard bolted the last of her food and stood up, her eyes catching his. “Thank you, Joker.”

He smiled at her and would have said something, but Kasumi's chopsticks darted to his plate again. By the time he was completely assured of meal-security, she was gone.
Joker woke when his alarm blared, and stared at the bulkhead opposite his bunk in sleepy confusion.

He'd been dreaming, and he hadn't wanted it to stop. They'd been docked on Illium – no, the Citadel. He'd found the Commander in his chair, and leaned over to talk to her while she tipped her head back to talk to him, an upside-down conversation.

That really happened.

Then he'd kissed her.

That definitely hadn't.

He wasn't sure how he felt about the fact that the dream had only gotten as far as kissing before the alarm went off. On the one hand, remembering it wouldn't make him feel entirely awkward. On the other, he'd always figured you didn't have to feel guilty for what your subconscious got up to while you slept, and as long as he had that plausible deniability he really would have liked to enjoy the good bits.

It had been a damn good kiss, though. His subconscious wasn't a slouch. He was still thinking about it when he finished his shower and found himself a place in the mess.

Conversation at the table paused a moment when Kasumi came in.

"Saks alert," Rolston hissed.

The thief sat down next to Joker and asked conversationally, "So what is 'sax' and why are we alerted about it?"

Rolston blushed. "Er, uh… Shepard's Ass-Kicking Squad, ma'am. We don't see many of you eating with us."

"I like company. And I like to think of myself as more subtle than 'ass-kicking.' I may be the only one who is." She smiled. "Pass the orange juice."

Gardner delivered a fresh round of coffee and took the opportunity to give everyone the evil eye and demand to know who had written "Organize your cupboards, sergeant!" in potato flakes on his counter.

Joker shrugged along with the rest in total honesty. When Gardner turned his back, still grumbling, Kasumi leaned over to Joker and whispered, "Did you change it from 'Rupert' to 'Sergeant'?"

He shook his head. "After we put all that time into it? Of course not."

He hadn't realized that Shepard was behind him until she leaned down and murmured, "I thought first names were a bit unprofessional. Nice calligraphy, by the way," and walked away from the table before they could respond.

Kasumi's eyes twinkled under the shadow of her cowl, meeting Joker's grin. She put a hand to her mouth giggled. Rupert whirled on the table with murder in his eyes.

"Oops, look at me, late for target practice!" Joker drained off the last of his coffee. "See ya, kids."
They'd set the makeshift range up in the hangar; the only place big enough. Jacob was walking up and down the line giving pointers, and Shepard leaned casually against the wall, eyes on everyone at once.

Only three other crew there. *That should keep it from being a total circus.* He walked over to the table where to select a pistol, then glanced at the line.

"Oh, hell no. I am not going up there as long as Matthews is holding a gun like that."

He didn't think anyone else heard Shepard sigh as she pushed off the wall and went to remind Matthews of basic safety protocol. Joker surreptitiously watched her correct his grip. It'd been a long time since his basic firearms training, and his re-cert courses had focused on rifles. His shoulders still ached with the memory.

When he was convinced Matthews wasn't going to put a bullet through his head on accident, he walked up to his place, went through the safety checks, and took his turn.

*Huh. Still aim left. Should have remembered that.* He corrected for his second shot; better.

"Hey," Shepard's voice was even, careful not to startle him. He glanced over to see her watching. "Shoot."

He did.

"Thought so. You're tensing up through your shoulders whenever you fire."

He hadn't noticed, though now that she pointed it out he could feel the residual stress. He bit his lip in frustration and mimed pulling the trigger, trying to become aware of the involuntary reaction. Ha. Damn muscle memory – he'd been tensing up remembering the recoil of a much different weapon. He schooled himself to let it go, not to twitch on the trigger-pull, and tried again.

Shepard nodded her satisfaction, gave him a thumbs-up, and resumed her post by the wall.

Matthews shook his head. "Damn, I hate being schooled by the commander."

Joker rolled his eyes. "Would you rather get schooled by someone who *didn't* know what the hell they were doing?"

As he got used to it, he was surprised to find that he was actually *enjoying* himself. When he didn't have to worry about hurting himself doing something stupid – *well, anymore than any other idiot with a gun* – he could sink into the challenge of hand-eye coordination. There'd never been anything wrong with his *eyes.*

Other members of Shepard's team drifted in and offered advice, or looked on from the overhead companionway. Most drifted out again. The scarred old merc held down a patch of wall near Shepard, with the same casual-but-alert poise.

Next to him, Matthews muttered "Damn, I can't concentrate with the ass-kicking squad down here watching."

He didn't mutter quietly enough.

Shepard barked a laugh. "If you were in the actual military instead of this outfit you'd have to deal with a bit worse than a little audience. No one's even shouting at you," she raised one eyebrow, "Yet."
Matthews’ eyes rolled back towards where Zaeed leaned against the wall "Yeah, but he's –"

"– another pair of brawny arms to carry out Daniels' body if you don't STOP WAVING THAT GUN IN HER DIRECTION, Matthews!" Shepard's drill-instructor bellow would have carried across a battlefield, and it echoed in the hangar.

It was followed by Zaeed's throaty chuckle. "Heh, damn kid's gonna shoot himself in the foot, you make him jump like that again."

"As long as he hurts himself and not someone else," Shepard said wryly.

"Fuck, Shepard, it wasn't a complaint. Was a bleedin' request. Could use some excitement around here."

"I think not, Massani."

"Well, fuck. And that was my bloody polite voice, too."

Chakwas strode in, her pace brisk as always.

"Is this entirely necessary, Commander? I have rather more important things to do than play with guns."

"Humor me, Doctor."

Sighing, the silver-haired doctor plucked a pistol from the table, armed it in one smooth motion as she walked to the firing line, paused long enough to put six bullets in the bullseye, and walked back to Shepard, apparently oblivious to the stares from the rest of the crew.

The commander nodded without showing a hint of surprise and thanked her for coming down.

Joker's omnitool chimed, alerting him that the extra time he'd arranged with Mercer the night before was almost up. He kept going until the heat sink was spent, then packed in.

"Get outta here, Moreau, you're making me look bad," Matthews grumbled.

"You don't need any help, Matthews." He punched the channel for the helm and let Mercer know he was on his way up.

"Roger, sir. Is the commander down there?"

"Yup."

"Please let her know we're only two hours out from Tuchanka."

"Will do, Mercer. Thanks for covering."

Shepard didn't like Tuchanka, but she felt more comfortable there than she did on glittering Illium or the Citadel. It's a shit hole. No wonder it feels like home. Sure, the Urdnot camp had mildly radioactive dust in place of muddy streets littered with broken needles, but the crappy concrete was the same the galaxy over.

An entire species that was used and discarded, falling through the cracks.
Her dark mood lifted when she saw her old friend Wrex, and brightened more when he shoved his supplicants aside to give her a massive bear hug. *Krogan hug*. He was gentler with Tali, and only clasped Garrus' arm, but the joyful feeling of comrades-in-arms well-met carried her through the morning.

She needed it.

When he discovered they were heading to Tuchanka, Mordin had sought her out to ask a favor. She'd been happy to look for his former student, and had assumed that 'looking' for a salarian scientist on Tuchanka would naturally involve a fair amount of *shooting*, so she was prepared for heavy combat. She hadn't been prepared to make the call on krogan genophage research for the *second* time in her life.

*I'm a god-damn marine. This is not my job.* Only she wasn't an Alliance marine anymore. She was a… *Cerberus asset? Very expensive piece of equipment?* She certainly wasn't an employee. Employees got *paid*.

She didn't believe in any god, gods, or spirits, but that didn't mean she should be *playing* one. The rough existence the krogan eked out on their battered home-world was all the galaxy thought they deserved after their bloody wars of aggression, but those wars had happened while humans were still… actually, she had no idea what 8th century humans had been up to, besides survival. Ancient history had never been her strong point.

In the end, she realized there had never been a question: she couldn't let Wrex down a second time. Watching her friend agree to blow up the research station on Virmire had been bad enough.

After that, finding out that the test-tube krogan who'd been going crazy in her cargo hold was just in the throes of adolescence was something of a relief, even if it was a particularly *violent* adolescence. The krogan coming-of-age ritual promised to be equally violent. She was looking forward to it.

Zaeed had mentioned wanting some excitement, hadn't he? She sent Garrus back up with Mercer and had Zaeed shuttle down, then the three of them went off to find the Urdnot Shaman.

---

Joker was at his usual post when Kelly Chambers bubbled up to him, snagging the co-pilot's seat and leaning over to watch the ground-team's helmet-cam vid. He would have run her off, but she'd brought him a fresh cup of coffee. It had too much milk in it and Gardner's ship-brew was a sad let-down after Shepard's personal stash, but it was coffee. A little bribe never hurt.

Chambers was impressed. "Fascinating! She really speaks their language."

Joker rolled his eyes. "If she keeps speaking their language that way she's going to suffer brain damage."

Kelly dismissed that with a wave of her hand. "She had a helmet. I'm just surprised I never noticed the connection before. It all fits."

Chambers' position as ship psychologist was supposed to be a secret, but Joker had spent too much time in shrinks' offices over the last two years not to be able to figure it out, and Shepard had confirmed his suspicions. Too, Chambers wasn't exactly *good* at the whole 'surreptitious' thing.

He hated psychologists. On the other hand, any explanation of why the Commander had just head-butted a Krogan was welcome.
"Kelly, if you're going to sit up here and annoy the shit out of me, have the decency to do it in complete sentences."

She looked surprised. *Just thrilled at the invitation to talk*, he figured. *Usually I'm trying to get her to can it.*

"Krogan hierarchy is fluid, not externally imposed -- say, by rules, or an unchangeable authority figure. When an unknown quantity, i.e., Shepard, is introduced, they need to find where she falls in their hierarchy. She just showed them."

"Wow. Suddenly yearly performance evaluations don't look so bad."

——

The ground was shaking.

*Oh, fuuuuck.*

"Bloody hell," Zaeed's curse echoed her own thoughts.

Shepard yelled at her team to scatter as the thresher maw's enormous head shot out of the hot Tuchankan ground. Zaeed jumped right, she rolled left, and Grunt – Grunt totally ignored her and made an impressive and idiotic stand right in the middle, bellowing at the top of his lungs.

Oh well. Distractions were useful too.

Grunt's bellow went up an octave as the maw's acid hit him, and she heard the rattle of assault rifle fire bouncing off the creature's tough hide as it dove back beneath the soil.

"Aim for the mouth. Keep it distracted!"

Massani bolted for new cover as the maw shot up near his old position, screaming as he ran, "Fuck you and the slut you rode in on!"

Shepard wasn't sure if that was aimed at her or the monster, and she didn't care. She was spread-eagle in the dust, readying her weaponry.

Mercer hadn't just brought Zaeed. She'd also brought the M-920 Cain.

Kasumi might claim that rail-guns weren't romantic, but they were certainly *effective*. Given the choice between the two, Shepard would take effective any day of the week.

*Very* effective.

When the dust settled they were all still in one piece, though Grunt would carry venom scars for the rest of his life. He was so excited about it that she had to order him to be still while she and Zaeed cleaned the worst ones. Zaeed swore quietly all the while.

She grinned. "You're just pissed we don't have a fireplace to mount the head over."

"Hafta be a damn big fireplace."

"We can keep the HEAD?"

She was quick to assure the over-excited krogan that keeping a thresher-maw head was not an option, and that he was certain to be honored as a true member of Urdnot once they returned to the
camp. Even she was surprised at how honored. They returned as night was falling, to find a party already in full swing.

Wrex clapped her on the back. "Shepard! No one's actually killed the thresher maw since I did my rite."

"You've killed a fair few since then, Wrex." She grinned. "I think this was actually easier than in the mako." She was convinced that at least one of the maws they'd encountered had given up in frustration chasing them around.

Tali stood beside him, her suit filthy and posture happy. She had remained at camp the whole day, catching up. "Well, with –"

Shepard said "– his driving," pointing at Wrex at the same moment he said "– her driving," pointing at Shepard.

"– like a drunken pyjak," Tali laughed, "it's a wonder we could ever hit anything at all."

"Well, we're wonderful. Hold on a moment." Shepard cupped a hand to her ear to block out the growing sounds of revelry and called the Normandy.

"Come on, Joker, get planetside for once. Party on scenic Tuchanka!" Her helmet was under her arm, and she swung it 'round in a wide arc so the cam would get the full picture.

"Commander, you always take us to the nicest places. I'd love to, but I'm afraid I don't own any dust-and-debris themed formal wear."

Rhi tried to picture Joker in any kind of formal wear and quickly gave it up as a lost cause. "Excuses, excuses. Look, I'm not granting crew liberty on Tuchanka because I don't want any stupid accidents, but if any of the ground team want to come down, have Mercer bring 'em. I want the shuttle down here until we leave."

"Aye aye, Commander, I'll let 'em know."

She rejoined the party, finding herself with a rather dubious looking beer, a stringy piece of pyjack, and a ring-side seat near Wrex at a wrestling match in short order. Krogan entertainment was as violent as one would expect, but Wrex did a good job of keeping it within bounds. Zaeed had claimed a perch on a barrel, where he was holding forth on old war stories to an eager audience, gesturing with a truly hideous black cigar. Grunt was in a place of honor, having the time of his short life. The sound of drums pounded up through her feet.

Quite the party.

When she went searching for water to refill her stale canteen, things got a little more interesting.

The big male looked her up and down through narrowed eyes.

"They tell me you're a warrior. That you and that tank-bred took down a thresher-maw. And you're asking for water?"

A crowd assembled as he spoke, a seven-foot-tall armored barrier that was itching to see another fight.

She shrugged one shoulder, casually. "Would have brought back the head, but it didn't fit in your truck."
His mouth gaped in a predatory, unfriendly grin. "Well, a warrior that mighty deserves a real drink." He reached under a table and pulled out a thick, double-insulated jug. It was smoking slightly.

Shepard gave the krogan an aloof glare. It's just like the gangs were, she thought. They're testing me, establishing the hierarchy. Act tough.

"Pour me a shot."

"Shepard." Wrex had appeared beside her, and there was warning in his voice.

"Wrex."

"Shepard, ryncol will tear a human's insides apart."

She raised her eyebrows. "So will thresher-maw venom."

Wrex subsided. It'd be impolite to make me look weak in front of his clan. Hah, krogan manners.

The ryncol smelled worse than she remembered from her bender on the Citadel. Of course, she'd had four… five… some drinks already by then, which did a marvelous job of padding the way for anything that came after. She was almost sober, now, which she was counting on to keep her from passing out. Dear hells, I do NOT want to see the krogan men's room.

If I'm sober, why am I even considering drinking ryncol?

Does an adrenaline high count?

Fuck it. Down the hatch.

She swirled the glass once, then took a sizable slug. It burned. She needed all her vaunted self-control to keep a cool mask in place while she made a show of swirling the brew around her mouth. She started to blink involuntarily but managed to keep her eyes closed instead, turning it into the thoughtful expression of a connoisseur.

"Hmm. Musky. A little young. When was it bottled?"

"This morning."

She nodded sagely. "Give it another hour."

She'd thought they'd impressed the clan battling the thresher maw, but apparently drinking ryncol had brought their estimation of her to new heights. The younger krogan backed up to give her more respectful distance.

Damn, I can already feel this stuff working. She grinned at Wrex. Gotta get out of here before this shit really hits me.

Apparently he heard her thinking. "Urshi! I have important things to discuss with the commander. Continue your amusements."

Good ol' Wrex. She tossed off the rest of the shot – wouldn't be polite to waste it – and followed him.

Once in the (blessedly private) room she let herself slump back against the wall and laughed.
"That was unnecessary," he growled.

"Yeah, but it was fun. The looks on their faces..."

He chuckled. "Your position on Tuchanka is assured, Shepard."

"Great. A position on Tuchanka is what I've always, always wanted. That and a pony."

"You're going to regret it in the morning."

"Morning? I'm regretting it now."

The room started to sway slightly. She collapsed on one of the cleaner crates with a muttered "damn gravity on this planet."

'Concern' wasn't really in the Krogan vocabulary, but Wrex substituted practicality. "You should report to the med-lab."

She leaned her head back against the wall while she looked up at him. Keeping it steady suddenly seemed like a lot of work. "Nah. I knew it wouldn't kill me. Cerberus, did... stuff." She gestured vaguely down the length of her body. "I spent the first few weeks after they revived me testing the limits of their enhancements. Ryncol was one of the experiments."

"Ah. Rigorous testing." He chuckled again, the deep, dry krogan chuckle she'd heard when they were mopping up after seemingly impossible battles. *My mountain.* She looked up at him fondly.

She hadn't fooled him.

"Okay, you're right, I was all messed up, pissed at Cerberus, pissed at the world, and trying to spend as much time shit-faced as humanly possible. I got better." *Mostly.*

He grunted. "You've changed."

"Have I?" Her brow creased. She wasn't sure if that was good or bad. The idea that Cerberus had changed her was terrifying, but to go through her experiences without being changed would be... inhuman.

"You laugh more. You fight harder. Your shields go down easier. Good if you're krogan. Maybe not so good if you're you." Piercing red eyes focused on her. "You okay, Shepard?"

She met his eyes, serious.

"Gettin' there. I think."

"Good."

They sat in companionable silence for a moment. The krogan drained off his mug of ryncol.

"You've changed yourself, Wrex. Leadership suits you. You're in your element. Practically paternal."

He scowled. "Not paternal yet, Shepard."

"Sorry to hear it." She pulled a flask from her hip and took a swig. Stale, but water, thank goodness. "Could still happen, right? Pitter-patter of mini wrex feet?"
"Pitter patter of... you've never met krogan young."

She shook her head.

"I doubt our methods of child rearing would look familiar to you."

She laughed, "Wrex, human methods of child rearing aren't familiar to me. I didn't exactly grow up in the usual situation. Had to learn about normal families from vids." She took another drink of water. The ryncol burn had finally mellowed to a pleasant glow. "I s'pose you're tellin' me I won't get my inbox flooded with holos of adorable wrexlets taking their first steps and being swung through the air?"

"Swung through the air?" He stopped pacing and looked at her in surprise. "Humans fling their young?"

"No, no, not fling. Swing. Like, a parent will pick a kid up by the arms or the waist and lift 'em up, swing 'em in circles, so the kid can pretend to fly."

Wrex looked disbelieving.

She stood up and stretched. "Shit, Wrex, don't ask me about this stuff. I didn't have that kind of childhood. Kinda looks like fun, though." The wistful note in her voice surprised her. Rhi rarely spared a thought for the life she'd missed.

The krogan stood in the middle of the room, staring at her, impassive.

Let it go. The ryncol is talking. "Ah, never mind me, Wrex."

"Shepard."

"Wrex?"

"Shepard."

He beckoned her forward with one thick talon. Her brow creased in puzzlement.

Thick krogan hands clasped her waist, making her glad of the armor she still wore, as Wrex bent his knees and lifted the Savior of the Citadel and hero of the Skyllian Blitz into the air.

Rhi knew she was grinning like an idiot. She spread her arms wide as the krogan spun, overflowing with uncontrollable, gleeful, childlike laughter. She could feel the shake of Wrex's answering laughter through her ribs.

Finally the ryncol caught up to her. She giggled, "Oh, oh, stop, or I'm going to be sick!" and they both collapsed to the floor.

She was still smiling so hard she feared her face might split, and she laughed until she cried. Wrex's jaw had dropped in a krogan grin. He looked almost... sheepish?

"Shepard."

"Oh, Wrex."

His red eyes twinkled with merriment. "We will never speak of this to anyone."

"Never, Wrex."
A soft chime announced that the ground team was approaching the shuttle, jerking Joker into wakefulness. He'd dozed off at his station. It was long past the time he should have headed down to bed, but he refused to leave the helm while Sheppard was dirt-side, even if it was for a celebration. You never knew when she'd piss someone off or step in a volcano or something, and need him to pull her ass out of the fire.

The fact that it was a Krogan celebration just made 'need for immediate rescue' that much more likely.

"Kodiak to Normandy, prepping shuttle for return." Mercer's voice had a burr of sleep. At least she'd stuck to her post instead of joining the party.

"Acknowledged, Mercer." He hoped he did a better job disguising the yawn in his voice than she did.

"Crew boarding… wait. What?" There was a moment of silence. "Oh, crap."

"Got a problem down there, Mercer?" He pulled up the shuttle vid. Commander Shepard was crouched at the hatch, preventing the door from closing. She was… crooning?

"Come on, there'sa good boy. Whooza good boy? Ss'you!"

Her voice was higher when she was drunk.

"Jus a lil bit farther, c'mon. Whoooooa good boy!"

He pulled up the exterior feed.

*Well, holy shit.*

The commander was trying to bring home a varren.

The problem with holographic interfaces was that it was really unsatisfying to bang your head against them.

He scanned through the channels to see who was on the ground. Tali had gone back to the shuttle early; she was curled up in a seat against the wall, apparently asleep. Grunt had staggered back with the commander but collapsed when he hit the shuttle, dead to the world. Apparently Krogan teens didn't judge their booze tolerance any better than humans did. Zaeed was sitting on the shuttle floor, pointing at the commander and laughing his ass off.

This wasn't something he could expect Mercer to deal with. He opened Sheppard's channel. "Commander, time to get back to the Normandy."

He watched her turn her head in the vid feed, apparently searching for his voice. As if bringing home stray varren wasn't enough to convince him she was drunk. *It's in your earpiece, you loon.*

"Hiiijoker! Lookit I found." She pointed triumphantly at the purple striped varren. "S'namez Urz!"

"That's nice, Commander. Let's leave the nice varren on Tuchanka now, okay?"

"But heez my friend."
"It won't work. You'd have to take him on walks, and clean up after him, and feed him… by the way, Gardner says three more of your fish died."

There was a pause as she worked out the implications of this.

*This is the smartest, most capable woman I know.*

*We are all fucked.*

"S'good! I can fee… he can eat z'deaf fishesh!"

*That's my Shepard, always the problem solver.*

"Pretty sure the other fish already ate 'em, Commander. Gardner only found a tail."

"Wow… s'life, Joker. S'a mi-cro-coshm, tha' fish tank. Ver' deep."

"Yeah, we could all learn things from your fish tank." He took a deep breath. "Like, fish need water, humans need air, and varren need to stay on Tuchanka. Come on, Commander. He wouldn't be very happy on the *Normandy*."

"Oh."

"You can come back and visit him later." He sighed. "Come on home, Commander, okay?"

"Yeah, okaaay." Her voice brightened. "*Y'er home, Joker.*"

What did *that* mean? "Right here waiting for you on the Normandy."

He watched Shepard lean out of the door one more time, face perilously close to the Varren's inch-long teeth, and scratch it on the head. "Be a goo' boy, now." It made some kind of happy face-eating-carnivore noise, and Shepard stumbled backward into the shuttle.

Mercer's voice cut through on her private feed. "*Thanks*, sir. I didn't know how to deal with that."

"No problem, Mercer. Don't spread it around, okay? It's not like a giant krogan party is an issue we're going to have to deal with again. And get some sleep when you get back."

"Aye aye, sir."

He waited 'till the shuttle was safely docked and he assumed everyone was safely off to bed, then started the procedure to switch over control to the helm VI.

"The crew is all present, Mr. Moreau. Do we have new destination co-ordinates?"

"Shit no, EDI. There's no way we're breaking orbit in the next eight hours. I'm gonna get some rack time. Scream if you need me."

He was about to get up when Shepard staggered down the hall and collapsed by his chair.

*Great. At least she's not pinning me this time.*

*Are you sure you're happy she isn't?* the treacherous part of his brain answered. He remembered his dream, lips warm against hers.

*Hey, I can't deny it'd be nice if it was real and she was sober, but I'm sick of seeing her drunk. And*
apparently I need sleep, because I'm talking to myself.

"Hiiii Joker." She leaned over as if to pat him on the arm, but missed by a good six inches and patted the chair instead.

He pinged Kelly's private alarm.

"Huhng… hello, Jeff! Is there a problem?"

Credit where it was due, the yeoman could go from zero to chipper in under fifteen seconds.

"Ground team's back from the party. Come up here and help the commander, will ya?"

"Be right up."

Shepard was looking at him through half-lidded eyes. She held out her arms wide. "I c'n fly too!"

His brow creased. "Fly? What…?"

"Not tellin!"

…Right. "I didn't realize krogan went in for drugs."

"No!" She shook her head, then held it in her hands. "Ow." Her Cerberus-liver seemed to make the jump from buzz to hangover happen real fast.

"After tha' ground-glass cocktail i' was jus' normal drinks." She must have caught some of his disapproval. "Had to. S'plomacy. Dip-lo-ma-see. Fuckin' krogan."

Kelly appeared in the cockpit in time to hear the last bit, quick as her word. She caught his eye and shrugged apologetically. "I know it looks bad, but you have to admit that she handles the krogan brilliantly. She understands their dominance posturing better than any xenanthropologist I've ever seen." She bent over and got a shoulder under Shepard's arm, hauling the taller woman to her feet. "Drinking that ryncol was a stroke of genius."

"Yeah, yeah. Get the genius to bed before anyone else sees her, okay? I don't think the rest of the crew has quite your appreciation for the results of inter-species diplomacy."

"Please, Jeff, I'm a professional. And everyone's asleep but us."

"Great!" Shepard interrupted. "S'perfect time to moon wasizname. T'fuck stick. Lusive man. C'mon, Joker, you c'n show 'im yer tattoos."

Kelly brightened. "You have tattoos?"

He dropped his head into his hands. "Not on my ass."

"Oh well." Kelly grinned at him, then turned her smile on Shepard. "C'mon, Commander, let's get you to bed."

He watched them stagger off, keeping his reservations about Kelly's ability to keep her mouth shut to himself, and went to find his own bed.
Chapter 13

The *Normandy* was hushed that morning.

Most of the crew had been stuck aboard and sober the night before, so they were awake and rational enough to realize that the people nursing hangovers were the same people who slept with their guns and used violence as a problem solving technique.

Joker ran into Kelly Chambers when he dragged himself out of bed and went to get coffee. The yeoman's usually bright smile was marred by a slightly fat lip, and the area around her eye was starting to purple.

"Shit, Chambers, what happened to you?" He'd last seen her staggering off with Shepard. "You two manage to run into a wall?"

"Feels like it." Kelly grinned, sheepishly, and brushed a finger across the injury. "I thought Shepard would appreciate not waking up in a filthy uniform. Apparently I thought wrong."

He stared at her for a moment. Far too many ideas were racing through his head: Kelly getting beaten up by a drunk Shepard was pretty funny; Shepard being drunk enough to slug her yeoman wasn't very funny (though if some other pilot had to convince some other captain not to bring home a varren, that would have been pretty damn funny); that black eye had to hurt; he really liked the idea of taking Shepard's clothes off; he really didn't like the idea of Kelly doing it (and apparently neither had Shepard); and he hadn't had nearly enough caffeine for any of this.

One wasn't very nice, considering three. Two wasn't something he was comfortable discussing. Four was so off-limits he shouldn't even be thinking about it, and five was none of his business.

He took a long sip of coffee (neatly dealing with item six) and said, "Ouch." He hoped it sounded properly sympathetic.

Kelly shrugged. "Well, I knew saving the galaxy would be dangerous when I signed on, right? And she did let me take her boots off, at least."

"Is she still out?"

"I hope so. I reset her alarm for nine o'clock. Join me for breakfast?"

That gave him at least an hour before they had a new heading. He didn't feel like hanging out with Chambers, so he grasped for a reasonable excuse. "Thanks, but I was just headed down to see how Tali's doing."

He took along well with the quarian, but it was almost always by radio. They were both obsessed with their jobs, and their jobs were at opposite ends of the ship. A normal visit wasn't a bad idea.

As he'd guessed, Tali was already hard at work, even though she'd slept at least half the night curled awkwardly on a seat in the Kodiak. She seemed pleased enough to have company – Gabby and Ken must still be sacked out, enjoying the unexpected reprieve from their normal schedule.

Joker perched on the rail and bit into his ration bar. They were even worse than he remembered. *Probably something to do with the brain putting up blocks to protect itself from remembered...*
He must not have managed to keep the look of disgust on his face, because Tali asked, "Is it that awful? Shepard never seems to mind."

"Shepard's not the best example of normal human tastes. She's a food slut." He choked down his swallow with difficulty and a slug of Gardner's weak coffee. "You know the word 'slut'?"

Tali's zeal for new knowledge could match Mordin's. Recently, she'd been trying to become less reliant on her translator.

She nodded. "It came up recently in conversation, and Donnelly was very helpful in defining it for me."

_This I have to hear._ "What was his definition?"

"Kelly Chambers."

"Ha! You know he was –"

"– Trying to get me in trouble, yes, I know. The lexicographic software I've downloaded is really very good. I just ask him because it's amusing."

"I was going to say 'he was right', but hey, yeah, that too!"

"She seems quite nice, really."

"Oh, she's nice to everyone." He narrowed his eyes theatrically. "A little too nice."

He took a bite of the ration bar and made another face.

Tali shook her head. "You really don't have to limit yourself to unpleasant food just to spare my feelings, Jeff."

"Hey, I'm trying to be all empathetic for once." He always felt vaguely guilty eating around the quarian, knowing she was probably sucking some flavorless dextro-goop through a tube, and the ration bar breakfast had seemed like a decent compromise.


"Did we at least pick up some variety for you on the Citadel?"

"A bit; anything more would require preparation, and I don't trust Gardner."

"Neither do we, but the 'constant fear of gut-wrenching nausea' adds just the right je ne sais quoi. If it isn't flavored with flavor, spice it with fear!"

She was quiet a moment – probably waiting for her translator to grapple with the French – then she chuckled. She knew he was only dismissing the fare so she wouldn't be envious, and he knew she knew. Polite social fictions mattered even more when you lived in close quarters. Just because he frequently chose to ignore them didn't mean he was an idiot.

"Honestly? I don't know what I'm missing. That makes it easier, I suppose." She tinkered with something on her omnitool. "Of course, on the fleet there's a lot more variety of flavor, but the texture… better just to swallow necessary nutrients quickly, really."
"Never knowing the decadence of a really good burger dribbling grease down your arm…" He shook his head. "Very sad, Tali."

She made a disgusted noise. "I still can't believe humans eat animals. Animals!"

He'd been hoping for that reaction. There was something deliciously predatory about needling vegetarians. Empathy only went so far, after all. He grinned. "That's why we have such lovely sharp teeth."

"I'd be careful about bragging about your meat-teeth when you have no idea what my face looks like."

*She has a point.* His musing on quarian teeth (and quarian faces in general) was interrupted when she walked over next to him, holding out her omnitool.

It had to do with what he'd been thinking of as the Lost Hamster Problem.

Apparently, power had been siphoned off several major ship functions and rerouted into batteries – batteries which Tali had hunted down and removed. Now whatever was pulling power would have to draw it all at once, making it easier to track – and catch.

She gestured. "This is the range we're looking for. I could set up a sub-program to track it, but –"

*But that could alert someone that we're looking.* He gestured to the omnitool notes about the battery removal. "Isn't this noticeable?"

Tali straightened, and there was a hint of smug satisfaction in her voice. "Not the way I did it."

"You're fantastic, y'know that? I'll keep an eye on out. I'm usually up late anyway."

"Great, I've got mornings. Garrus will check in at –"

The doors to engineering slid open, and the turian interrupted her. "What's that human expression? My ears are on fire?"

Joker snorted. "Burning. Don't you have something to calibrate?"

"I know this will shock you, but the main gun is… still in need of significant calibration, actually. I was going to ask Shepard about test firing, but when I walked past the med-bay I heard her and Massani threatening to shoot the krogan if he moaned again." He flicked his mandibles in amusement. "I do have some instinct for self preservation. That must have been some party."

"Apparently. I had to talk Shepard out of bringing home a varren."

"That isn't necessarily a sign she was drunk," Garrus said dryly, "she already has a hamster. And Grunt. At least a varren would be useful."

"Are we talking about the same thing, vicious filthy carnivore, here?" Joker asked.

"Varren are versatile. They can eat enemies. You can eat them."

"Can we stop talking about *eating animals,* please?" moaned Tali.

The turian answered her with a predatory grin, and Joker had to admit it was superior to his own. The needle-sharp teeth were really an unfair advantage.
"Wait, did you say Shepard was awake and in the med bay? Probably time for me to pretend to be working. See ya, Tal, Garrus."

——

Rhi opened her eyes at 0900 and immediately decided it was a bad idea. If the chrono hadn't insisted it was hours after she normally woke she'd have rolled right over, but the 9 refused to roll over and become a 6 despite her glare.

The krogan party hadn't stopped. It had just relocated itself to the inside of her skull.

She hadn't been hit this hard after the binge at DarkStar, when she'd had a lot more to drink in a shorter time. Of course, she'd lost most of it on the bathroom floor. _That was a drinking sprint. Last night was more of an endurance event._

Or maybe ryncol damage was cumulative. She'd have to ask Chakwas.

She managed to roll out of bed through an effort of will, started to take off her top, and realized that she was still in full uniform. Her hair had worked its way out of the bun during the night, but one pin was still tangled in it, jabbing her skull. She couldn't remember going to bed.

Come to that, she couldn't actually remember coming to her cabin at all.

She _did_ remember peeling out of her filthy armor on the shuttle ride up, throwing pieces of ceramic at Massani whenever he made crude comments, which had been whenever he'd managed to get his head to loll in her direction.

She didn't really remember going from shuttle to elevator, so maybe she'd just gone straight to bed – no. She'd gone to the command deck to talk to Joker. It had seemed important at the time, like she couldn't really be back on the Normandy if she didn't check in with the pilot. Though, 'checking in' was a very thin facade of professionalism for what she was actually thinking –

_Oh, shit. What had_ she said to Joker? _Had she said anything at all? If she did, how had he reacted? Of all the parts of the evening to forget, how had she forgotten that? And how did I get to bed?_

A hot shower did nothing to restore her memory, but it did help her feel slightly less disgusting. The krogan were still dancing in her skull, and it was past time to be on duty. Time to visit Chakwas. The doctor would give her pain meds, or kill her. She'd take either.

Through an effort of will, she managed to walk from the elevator to the med bay without stumbling or squinting. In an unusual display of sympathy, the bright surgical lights were dimmed. Chakwas was counting out pills into Massani's outstretched palm with a patient and somewhat mischievous smile. Shepard took a place behind Zaeed and held out her hand similarly.

"I'd have imagined you for more of a 'hair of the dog' sort of person, Mr. Massani," Chakwas murmured.

"Bloody big dog, that was," he grumbled. "If I was that much of an idiot I'd be dead by now."

Grunt stumbled in and rocked to a stop behind Shepard. "Something attacked me in the middle of the night. We have to find it."

Shepard grinned to herself, then winced. "You're hungover, Grunt. You'll feel fine soon."
"I am NOT!" he bellowed.

The young krogan was loud under normal circumstances; now it felt like an axe to the brain. Rhi had her pistol out and trained on him before her ears stopped ringing. Beside her, Zaeed had done the same – while dry-swallowing the pills from the doctor. His one good eye was squinting.

The doctor sighed. "Perhaps you'd best be a bit quieter, dear." She gestured Zaeed to a cot. "Ah, Shepard. I believe you might owe yeoman Chambers an apology…"

Joker recognized the commander's footsteps coming up behind him. He assumed she was just coming to give him their new heading, so he was surprised when she sat down in the co-pilot's seat and swung around to face him.

He was more surprised when she met his eyes and asked bluntly, "So, did I do anything last night I need to apologize for?"

Well, Shepard hadn't gotten where she was by being afraid of confrontation. Embarrassing questions didn't really stack up against, say, charging a YMIR mech.

When he didn't answer immediately, she raised one eyebrow and asked "That bad?"

He had to laugh. "Damn, give me some time, here. I'm trying to make up something really good."

EDI decided it was time to be helpful. "Mr. Moreau, lying to the commander would be – "

Shepard interrupted her. "A creative use of an opportunity I foolishly provided him, EDI, which makes it just about what I deserve for getting drunk enough that I don't remember. Thank you for looking out for me, though." She winked at him.

"So if I said you danced on the nav console – "

"You'll have to do better than that. I don't dance, even when I'm drunk."

That was surprising. He'd just assumed that anyone as fit as she was, as wonderfully in control of her body as she was, would be a dancer. *Projecting a little there, buddy?* If he could have physically handled it, *he'd* want to dance.

She must have sensed his surprise, because she shrugged, uncomfortably. "Most of the time there's been an opportunity, it wasn't a kind of attention I wanted." She said it to the floor, but when she raised her eyes back to his her tone was matter-of-fact. "So, really. What happened?"

"You tried to get me to moon the illusive man."

"Really?"

"EDI'll back me up."

"Just you?"

"I'm not sure, but you seemed to think it would be a joint endeavor."

"Well, principles of leadership and all, ask nothing of your crew you're not willing to do yourself…" she looked thoughtful. "That's not a bad idea, actually…" She grinned at him. "No, don't worry. I'll save the most flagrant displays of disgust until after we're done using his money."
Besides,” she added, "If the illusive man saw your mysterious tattoos before I did, I'd be really pissed."

"Why the hell do you think they're on my butt, anyway?"

"Because I've seen no evidence to the contrary." She leaned forward, a playful smile lighting up her eyes. "C'mon, Joker. Satisfy my curiosity."

It's not like it was a big secret – there'd been a common shower room on the SR1, and if he'd been an earlier riser or Shepard a later one, she'd surely have glimpsed them at least once – but he'd made a game out of denying her this long. He couldn't back down now.

Besides, even though it was clearly just a game to Shepard, he was feeling far too mixed up about her interest in seeing his ink, and it wasn't something he could unpack while she was sitting there. Especially when her eyes were shining in a way it'd be far too easy to misinterpret. Especially when her voice on that last request had practically been a purr.

"Speaking of tattoos, is Zaeed still moaning in the med bay, or is it safe to visit the doc again?"

She heard the brush-off for what it was and sighed, sitting back in the chair. "Apparently I should be thanking Cerberus for my quick recovery time." She grimaced. "Zaeed was still sitting on the floor with a pistol trained on Grunt when I left. He should be harmless unless you make a loud noise."

"Zaeed? Harmless?" Joker sputtered. "I'd hate to see your definition of cuddly, Commander. Oh, wait, I did! And it was a varren."

"He was a cute varren," she objected. She grinned, slyly, "But not actually my definition of cuddly." He wondered what the joke was. She leaned over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks, Joker. For putting up with my drunk ass."

He wasn't used to casual contact from anyone; certainly not from Shepard. He was so surprised by the touch he almost blurted out his first thought, which was that he'd never considered her ass a burden. More like a job perk. Office with a view. That would have been terrible behavior even for him.

She must have gotten used to him greeting sincere thanks with silence or evasion; she squeezed his shoulder lightly and started to walk away, leaving only the lingering heat of her hand. And a completely confused helmsman.

Joker grumbled to hide his nerves. "Zaeed's 'harmless' like you are," he muttered "He's like you but he takes checks--"

Shepard's footsteps paused.

"– as long as it's not my money, we're good."

The footsteps resumed, receding until they were lost in the sounds of the ship.

Shepard scowled at herself in the mirror, Joker's flippant summation of Zaeed running through her head.

"He's like you, but he takes checks."
Her fingers brushed the scars on her cheek, finally starting to heal, and she thought of Zaeed's mangled face and dead eye.

"He's like you…"

Zaeed was competent. Deadly with a slew of weapons, not afraid of close-contact fighting. Also bitter, vengeful…

…and ugly as hell.

She examined her reflection critically. Thick wavy hair, so dark a brown it looked black in dim light, pulled back in a severe bun. Brown skin, crisscrossed with scars. Since her wound on Horizon, not all of them were surgical, but the splatter of scar tissue on her thigh was hidden by her fatigue pants.

"He's like you, but takes checks."

Experimentally, she pulled the pins out of her hair and shook out the bun, letting it fall down to frame her face.

She looked like a soldier about to take a shower.

The only frivolity she'd ever gone in for was makeup, and even that was more than half strategic. She'd started using it to hide bruises at the boarding school. You were supposed to avoid the face in training bouts, but no such niceties applied to all of the unofficial fights she got into her first year off the street. She kept it up when she found that people were more intimidated by a woman who could not only kick their ass, but looked like she'd had time to put herself together first, too. Now her morning routine was topped off by lipstick so dark it was almost black. It was just another bit of armor.

"He's like you…"

There had to be more to distinguish them than money and motive. Though, to be fair, that was a large distinction. Zaeed had been paid, and paid well. She'd been given her life, whether she wanted it or not… but the funding was for the mission.

Aside from the bit of embezzlement she'd allowed herself to buy the hamster, she had nothing to her own name but armor and weapons. Which started to look a lot like how Zaeed lived, after all.

When she'd spoken with Anderson on the Citadel, she hadn't bothered to ask what had been done with her bank account. She couldn't exactly file any complaints – she had actually been dead – and at the time she would rather have faced a reaper than endure the mountain of red tape and bureaucratic confusion that would be the inevitable result of trying to get back any of her property. The alliance didn't have any pre-prepared forms for reinstating someone among the living.

Hell, some over-worked clerk would probably put a bullet in her head just to make reality line up with the paperwork.

Stuff had never mattered much to her, anyway. Maybe it should have. She'd grown up with nothing. A lot of people in her situation would have become packrats, hoarding property because they'd never had the chance, but for her, minimalism was habitual; her personal world fit in a kitbag. She'd bunked in Visiting Officer's Quarters more often than she'd bothered to lease an apartment.

She was continually baffled by Kasumi's transformation of the observation lounge. The woman's collection of sentimental decorations massed as much as everything Shepard had ever bothered to
own, combined. Well, minus the guns and armor, anyway.

She'd never needed things or a place to define who she was.

Still… it'd be nice to have civvies that hadn't been provided by Cerberus. Would anyone even recognize her if she wasn't wearing fatigues? She tried to imagine what she would buy, if she took leave of her senses and hit the citadel shops with the Illusive Man's credit chit.

It was no good. She didn't even know what she would wear anymore, given the choice. No matter what she tried to conjure up, the end result was the same. A marine awkwardly shoved into a civilian's clothing. A fake.

She turned from the mirror resolutely. You never used to give a shit about this crap. You could have spent your pay on clothes back when you had pay. And obviously she'd had clothes, then. Just normal clothes. Her friends had always wanted to know how she always got the person of her choice when they went out drinking. She'd laughed them off and told them it was confidence, not couture.

*And it was two years ago.* Everything had been different two years ago.

She was fastening her shipsuit when the cabin door chimed and Kasumi's voice came over the comm. "Shepard, I was hoping you had time to discuss the job I mentioned…"

"Come on in."

Kasumi waltzed into the cabin as if it was her own, setting the boxes she carried down on the low table and making an off-hand comment about the Spartan decor.

Shepard trailed after, brow creasing. "What's all this?"

The thief giggled. "Formal wear, silly. You didn't think I'd forgotten, did you?" She whipped off the box tops to reveal a dress and shoes nestled in tissue paper. The shoes were small and strappy. They had heels.

Rhi was briefly hit with a totally disproportionate feeling of despair. *Oh, fuck no, this is just ridiculous.* If she'd believed in Ashley's god, she would have thought he had a nasty sense of humor.

She couldn't see Goto's eyes underneath the cowl, but her mouth was smiling. *How to put this…*

"Kasumi, I am aware that Cerberus promised my help as part of your contract, and I have no intention of reneging on that. But I'm starting to think I can be the most help by loaning you Miranda." She eyed the boxes distrustfully. "She is a fully trained and capable operative, but more importantly, she's had experience with the type of society function you're heading to." *She wears heels all the god-damn time.* She smiled to show she was being helpful.

"Oh, Commander, I know you'll do just fine!"

Shepard raised her eyebrows. "If by 'fine' you mean 'slightly less obvious than Grunt', then yes, I would be fine. But I think we can do better for you than that. Miranda is the perfect fit."

The shorter woman's eyes glittered up at her from the shadows of her hood. "But I already found everything in your size! And you know you want to!"
No. I really, really don't.

She leaned back against the pillar and crossed her arms. "I realize it may not be common knowledge," she explained, "but I grew up on the street. They taught me table manners in Officer's Candidacy school – you think I'm joking, and I know it's funny, but I'm not. What you're suggesting is farcical."

"Ah, but everything about you says that you're very versatile."

"Yes," Shepard said dryly, "I can shoot people from an astonishing number of positions."

Kasumi laughed. "And funny. Besides, all of that is worked into your cover. You'll be perfect."

Lay it on the line. No one ever made a good strategy from bad intel. "I have no idea how to walk in heels."

"Surely you've worn them at least once before..." Goto caught Rhi's look. "No? Really? Didn't you have fancy dos in the navy, ever? I know the military is all about tradition."

"Sure. In dress blues."

"Well, at least you've worn a dress before...?" the thief's voice trailed off.

Rhi tried to remember. Surely she had, once? A vague memory of a denim jumper tickled at her, and she nodded tentatively. "Ye-es..."

"See, it's not so bad!"

"...I think I was eight."

If Kasumi was surprised, she recovered quickly. "Then it's about time again, isn't it?" She lapsed into a brief, thoughtful silence. "I think you're right about needing Miranda's help, though..."

Yes!

"We'll have to work out time for her to teach you to walk in heels. Hock's party isn't for weeks - you'll be fine! Anyway, I don't need to take any more of your time right now. Ja ne!"

Rhi stared after the departing thief, then sank against the wall, head in her arms.

First Joker compares me to Zaeed, now Miranda is going to teach me to make a mockery of myself. I should call the Illusive Man to make my day complete.

Fuck it. I'm going to go shoot something.

Chapter End Notes

"Ja ne" (jah ney) is a very casual Japanese goodbye.
Chapter 14

Joker relaxed back into his chair and scrubbed at his face with one hand. He really hadn't gotten enough sleep. Nothing else could explain how unsettled he was by a totally normal conversation.

*If having your CO offer a blanket apology for anything she may or may not have done while drunk is normal.*

Normal for the *Normandy*, then. Normal for Shepard. Her forthright manner hadn't changed a bit. *Though the drinking is only normal for the new Shepard.*

And maybe that was why he was so bothered.

New, old. She hadn't changed much; considering. But the only reason she'd changed at all was that he'd killed her.

And she'd apologized for doing embarrassing things while drunk? Holy shit, one of them had a priority problem.

*Probably me. Wouldn't the fucking shrinks love to hear me admit it.*

Sometimes he wanted desperately to apologize – usually when she wasn't anywhere nearby, and there was no risk of it actually happening. When she was actually around he dreaded the thought. He enjoyed spending time with her, and the appeal of having it off his chest was overwhelmed by knowing that it could fracture their easy camaraderie. Shepard clearly didn't like to think about her death and revival; except for a few exposed moments she never mentioned it at all. Somehow he didn't think she'd appreciate him bringing it up.

Besides, when they were talking, he didn't feel so bad. It was only after she left that the guilt hit him like a concussive round.

EDI interrupted his thoughts. “It would seem you are unusually thoughtful, Mr. Moreau. Personnel files would indicate that you don't think much at all, so this has been marked as unusual.”

He stared at her orb.

“That was a joke.”

“Shit, thing. Leave the jokes to us flesh beings, okay? I'll have you know I'm fucking deep. Like an ocean.”

“Or a black hole.” She paused for a moment. “By which I mean you suck.”

He took a deep breath.

“That was a joke.”

“No, EDI, that was an insult. There's a fine line.”

Damn the AI, anyway. He was a master of introspection. It went hand-in-hand with the pain-induced insomnia. Most nights he'd trade all his hard-won self-awareness in for the ability to get to sleep in ten minutes.

*So, Mr. Know-Thyself, what exactly do you think about Shepard's quest to discover your tattoos?*
It could be that she was simply asking about something too personal. Hell knows he'd admitted as much to her when they'd been working out, and she'd mostly treated it as a game since then—except that she'd clearly hung on his words at the time. She'd even gone out and gotten ink herself.

It could be that she was his commander, and that was just the kind of physical question it was unprofessional to ask. Not that he let that stop him most of the time; when there was actual flying to do his focus was perfect; who gave a shit about the other times?

He turned those ideas around in his head and discarded them. Sure, they made him a little uncomfortable, but… he liked it. He liked having her interested in something about him, whatever it was. He liked the attention.

No, when you got right down to it, the reason it bothered him was that he was pretty certain it was the only interest she'd ever show in his body.

He winced. That was painfully pathetic. Perhaps he was a bit more infatuated than he'd thought.

Possibly should have realized that when I started hanging around the mess late at night hoping she'd show up. Idiot. Someone like Shepard is not going to be interested in someone like you, even if you weren't responsible for her death.

She'd never even acknowledged his role in her death, which he was grateful for even as he hated it. He didn't know if it was a kindness, or if she thought him so inconsequential she didn't care. When she'd first come back, he'd almost asked if she remembered, but he knew better, now. If she remembered dying, surely she remembered the events leading up to it.

He remembered how he'd discovered that she relived it all, how he'd held her while she screamed. The nightmare didn't quite displace the memory of how nice it had felt when she'd fallen asleep on his shoulder.

He sternly reminded himself that that evening had ended in a broken arm. Without thinking about it, he rubbed at his shoulder where she'd laid her hand that morning. She'd only touched him three times, and the first two she'd broken bones. Shit, how much more warning did a guy need?

Maybe it would be best to confront her about those last few minutes of the SR1. He could be direct and apologize, and remind them both just what he was responsible for. He could get a burden out into the open, and Shepard… if Shepard was angry with him, maybe it'd be easier to stop thinking about her.

Two pyjacks with one over-powered krogan cannon.

That was it. He'd try to catch her tonight when the mess was empty.

He cued up some music, opened one of the interminable Cerberus maintenance reports, and started coming up with a plan to pick a fight with EDI. He needed something to distract him until Shepard decided to break orbit.

Shepard wouldn't normally ask for mission advice from the ship's surgeon, but everything about Kasumi's proposal was unusual. She outlined the thief's plan (and its obvious flaws) while sprawled in the med-bay with a cup of coffee.

Chakwas gave her an appraising look. “I agree – Miranda would be the wiser choice.”
Rhi should have been content to hear her opinion affirmed. Instead she was a bit dejected. Chakwas was as objective a second-opinion on the appearance issue as she could get. Stop being an idiot, marine.

The doctor continued. “You're still too well known. You might be able to count on aliens being bad with human facial recognition, but humans? Your holo has been shown far too often. Granted, most people are bad at recognizing others out of context, but in a party that size someone is sure to put two and two together.”

Oh. Her sense of relief was as absurd as her earlier distress. I'll have to point that out to Kasumi.

“Nothing we can't handle, though.”

“Excuse me?”

Chakwas clicked her tongue. “We'll just have to do something with your hair.”

Aw, fucksicles.

Rhi wrinkled her forehead, trying to make some sense out of a world where catastrophic extragalactic invaders led to strategically important beauty advice and failing utterly. “Thanks, I think.”

“Of course, dear.” The doctor stood up purposefully. “How long is it, anyway?”

The chime of her omnitool was a welcome excuse to leave before the doctor starting doing arcane things to her hair. Rhi had almost forgotten her appointment to work on hand-to-hand with operative Taylor. Sparring was even better stress relief than shooting things.

The first time she'd asked Jacob to join her, he'd clearly been afraid of some hidden meaning. She'd kept it strictly professional, and he'd started to relax, comfortable within the strict behavior standards they both remembered from their alliance service. She couldn't really blame him for being twitchy. Anyone who'd worked with Miranda for any length of time could be forgiven for looking for ulterior motives behind every word.

It had still taken another hour of cajoling, orders, and goading before he stopped pulling his punches. You'd think he'd learn by the fifth time he hit the mat. Her skills were rusty, but she'd started learning before she'd joined the marines, and her teacher was still one of the top alliance hand-to-hand instructors. Granted, Geltz had called her a “disappointing brawler lacking in any finesse” on more than one occasion, but at least she was a disappointment to one of the best.

She'd sent Geltz a message while they were on the Citadel, and still hadn't heard a response. He probably thought she was a terrorist, if he believed she was alive at all. She shoved the thought aside. He was a fragment of her past she'd seen at most once a year. It didn't matter. Teaching some of his skills to Taylor did.

Jacob Taylor was as fit as any soldier she'd ever seen, but he clearly hadn't spent much time on hand-to-hand combat. It was considered a waste of time for most marines; 'normal' battles were fought at assault rifle range. But Shepard had been in the service for over ten years before the Collectors destroyed the SR1, and she knew that a 'normal' battle was unlikely to happen outside of a textbook. Safer to be prepared.

They often had an audience; usually she took it as an opportunity to teach. This time was no different, though Zaeed was conspicuous by his absence. He loved watching Taylor get thrown; he must still be nursing his hangover. Instead, Garrus lounged against a crate and Kasumi perched
atop it. The thief pretended to be interested in technique, but the gleam in her dark eyes gave that the lie.

She must still be hoping Jacob would practice without his shirt on for once.

If she'd been pleased with Kasumi, Rhi might have taken the opportunity to demonstrate how easily a t-shirt could be pulled over an opponent's head to block their vision. Too bad for Goto. She shouldn't have suggested heels.

Jacob hit the mat with a grunt. She gave him a hand up and explained how he could have countered.

Miranda appeared as they were finishing up, ready to take some of the crew dirt-side to work on marksmanship. Shepard nodded a greeting and went back to stretching out her shoulder, trying to work out the place where it always knotted up.

“Why is it always the right one?” she muttered to herself.

Miranda heard. “Do you actually want to know?”

Oh, fuck. “You're going to tell me it's the one I landed on or something similarly charming, aren't you?”

Miranda smiled. “No, actually, the opposite. You landed on the other side; it had to be rebuilt from, ahem, the ground up. The one you have trouble with only needed slight repairs.”

Shepard stared at her.

“Like Moreau said, Commander. Retrofits are always a pain in the ass.”

As weird as it was, Rhi could only snort in agreement.

On the shuttle-ride down, Garrus was unusually garrulous, chattering away about unarmed combat techniques and sparring as stress-relief. She'd no idea he was so fascinated with it. She made a mental note to ask Mordin for turian anatomical charts. He seemed interested in joining the training matches, and she wasn't willing to fight him until she knew how to hurt him, and equally importantly, how not to.

Planet-side, she left Miranda with strict instructions to make the crew eat dirt if she saw anyone so much as thinking about breaking the rules of gun safety, and staked out a space some distance away with Garrus and Thane. The platforms on the collector ship had convinced her she needed at least one long-range weapon in her arsenal.

She stood at parade rest, facing her instructors.

“Okay, boys. Teach me.”

Thane's eyelids blinked, once, and then they both started talking at the same time.

She held up a hand. “One at a time, please. You have me outnumbered.”

Thane bowed graciously to Garrus, and the turian started to explain grip and position.

When Miranda took the shuttle back for a new group of FNGs, Shepard and her teachers were still hard at work.
She lined up for another shot, trying to keep the scope of the sniper rifle steady. They'd been planet side for hours, and dammit, she was going to get the hang of this thing.

"Steady, commander. Use the boulder if you need to – set up for the shot, every one counts. It's not like that SMG of yours." She swallowed a retort about just how much a shotgun blast counted. She was the student, here.

Garrus reached around her shoulders to correct her position, looking past her ear to follow her line of sight.

"Garrus, can we dispense with the training wheels? You don't get to steady my hand in combat."

"Agreed." Thane was standing on her other side a few yards away, dark eyes fixed on them. Garrus stepped back, and she was sure she could feel the heat of the two glaring at each other over the top of her head.

What in hell is going on here? Thane and Garrus had been circling each other like hawks all day. The tension was palpable. Maybe they should work it out in the ring, she thought, wickedly. Garrus has reach, but I bet Thane has flexibility.

"Shepard, why are you smiling?"

This time, she hit the target square in the bulls-eye.

Dusk was falling as they packed up and headed back to the kodiak, drell on one side of her, turian on the other. She'd never have the patience to be a sniper, but she had gotten used to tracking movement through the scope. She'd even practiced aiming while they took turns sneaking up on her. Target fixation got snipers killed.

On the Normandy she showered, threw on a clean uniform, and headed down to the command deck, where she was greeted cheerfully by Yeoman Chambers. Shepard winced inwardly. The bruise she'd given Kelly was starting to darken.

She quickly scanned the deck to see that everyone was at their station. Hadley, Matthews – she was distracted by a flash of cheery lemon-yellow. Huh?

She changed course for the cockpit, stopping short a few feet behind Joker's chair. She crossed her arms and rocked back on her heels, thoughtfully regarding EDI.

Joker hadn't spun around, but she knew he was watching her out of the corner of his eye, so she tried to suppress her smile. Damn him, anyway. It didn't make sense that his antics could cheer her up when the bad mood had started with him in the first place.

When her voice was under control, she said, "It looks good on you, EDI."

The AI's holographic orb flashed. "Commander Shepard. I would like to report a misuse of Cerberus resources."

Now Joker did spin around. He wasn't quite as practiced at hiding his grin as she was.

"No Cerberus resources used. The mono-filament was from Hadley." He shrugged. "Turns out he likes fishing. Who knew?"

Shepard felt the corner of her mouth twitch upwards and firmly reined it in. "And the hat?"
"Chambers." He scowled comically. "You didn't think it was mine, did you? Come on."

"Of course not." She paused. "Yellow isn't your color."

"Exactly. I'm much more of a raspberry man."

They both turned to gaze at EDI's projection. The blue orb was topped by a floppy straw sunhat with a trailing ribbon of lemon-yellow gauze. The hat was suspended from the ceiling with fishing line at a rather jaunty angle.

"I was referring to Cerberus financial resources, to wit, the paid time of Helmsman Jeff Moreau." Whoever programmed EDI's voice-synthesizer had really outdone themselves on the 'controlled exasperation' setting.

"Well, Joker?"

"I was right here, on-call and ready for action the moment we needed some flyin'."

"Works for me." Rhi put a little steel in her voice and faked a stern look. "EDI, if this were a military vessel I'd have to cite you for being out-of-uniform." She drummed her fingers against her arm. "You're getting off easy."

Joker licked one finger and drew a line in the air in front of him. “Point for me!”

Under her hat, EDI flickered with bad grace. “You have hands. It is an unfair advantage.”

“And you have eyes everywhere. It's an unfair creepiness.”

“One you should remember. Perhaps the commander would be interested in knowing about your tattoos.”

“Spying in the bathrooms, EDI? Not a good way to prove you're not creepy. Just a hint.”

“I monitor the crew for safety purposes, Mr. Moreau. I am merely doing my job. Unlike some individuals I could name.”

“Don't get jealous just 'cause I have so much skill to spare that I can do my job and have enough time to help you dress up.” An alert lit up on his console. “Though why Chambers has a sunhat on a spaceship – oops, hold on a sec.” He glanced at the CIC feed in time to see Shepard head towards the elevator and thumbed the radio.

"Stay put, Commander. Comm comin' through, real time. Comm room?"

"Here's fine. Patch it through, Joker."

Shepard turned back towards the center of the CIC. The space above the galaxy map glittered as the holoprojection formed.

The man who's image was now glaring over the CIC was no one Joker had ever seen, but Shepard had gone very, very still.

"Ahhh, the great Commander Shepard." The man spoke with an earth accent, something from the North American States, and his voice oozed sarcasm.
Joker enlarged the vid for the CIC so he could see the commander more clearly. Shepard looked so cool Chakwas could have prescribed her for fever.

"Trex."

"I sent you an invitation a few years ago, and you never even sent your regrets. That's impolite, Rhi."

"I declined. The RSVP was on the bullet I put in your messenger. Didn't you read it?"

No one in the CIC was even pretending to be working, now.

"Ah, yes, poor Finch. So cruel to an old childhood acquaintance, Shepard. Still," he shrugged, "I'm a generous man."

"Generous? You're a grasping, petty criminal. And apparently an anti-alien bigot. At least that part's new."

"Anti-alien bigot', says the woman standing in front of the Cerberus logo. Rich.’ He chuckled. "Stop being so Alliance goody-two-shoes. Everyone knows you have new friends now. I'm suggesting you might benefit from some old ones, too. I just want to talk."

Shepard crossed her arms. "Stop trying to be smooth, Trex, it never suited you."

He leered. "You still prefer it rough, Rhi? Like you did behind Rourke's?"

In the stunned silence of the CIC, Chamber's gasp was clear. Joker felt his face grow hot with rage. Shepard's only response was to raise one eyebrow.

"Seems we remember things a bit differently. As I recall you didn't get more than a grope before I kicked your balls up into your appendix." She smiled sweetly. "Have they dropped yet, or are you still waiting for that second puberty?"

The man's eyes flashed with anger. "As nice as this is, I didn't call to talk pretty with you, bitch."

"Then get to the point. Some of us have work to do."

"You're not the only one. I'm a busy man. Lotta people workin' for me." His grin showed missing teeth, replaced with sparkling alloy. "Lotta people. Some of ’em were lookin for you, but they found something better." He glanced at someone out of the field of view. "Refuse this invitation, Shepard."

A new face was shoved in front of the screen. A young woman, her light-brown hair dyed with streaks of blue. Maybe pretty, but it was impossible to tell with the bruise that darkened one temple and the tape across her mouth.

Shepard's brow furrowed slightly, but her voice was almost disinterested. "Who is she?"

"Vanessa."

Shepard's expression didn't change.

Trex reappeared, his arm casually draped around the shoulders of the gagged prisoner. "You don't remember her, Rhi? I'm surprised at you! Of course, we were all so much younger then… how time flies.” He pulled the girl back from the cam, yanked her skirt up to her hip, and shoved her
back at the lens so that her bare thigh took up the entire screen.

It was a mess of old, old scar tissue, the kind of mark even marines didn't get in these days of nano-surgery and auto-routed medigel. Ragged raised edges surrounding a sunken pit.

Exit wound.

Joker saw Shepard's jaw tense, her eyes flash with recognition. The hapless girl was pulled away from the lens.

"Oh, I see you do remember her."

Shepard gave the briefest of nods. "Why?"

"Because I want to see you face to face, and you're a hard woman to find."

"You never were any good at subtlety." The commander never lost her even tone. "I assume this is the part where you make threats?"

"Threats? I'm making an offer. I'm sending you coordinates. Show up, alone, we'll have a nice little discussion about the ways we can help each other out, and the girl goes back with you. See? Friendly."

Shepard stared, waiting. In the projection, the captive looked on with wild eyes and tried to shake her head 'no', only to be dragged out of the image.

"And, yes, if you take too long, I'll have to start cutting on her. Just a bit each day. I don't want to, but it's your choice."

A faint frown appeared on Shepard's face, and she leaned forward. "Don't be an idiot, Trex." She scowled. "You're in the ass-end of nowhere. If I decide it's worth my while, it'll take me four days to get there!"

That didn't sound right – not the sudden display of emotion, or the estimate. Joker had started running numbers as soon as the coordinates transmitted; they were three relay jumps away from the cluster. Five or six hours to get out-system from Tuchanka, a long cross-system run from the mass relay… without running the numbers, he thought two days. Shepard wasn't a navigator by any means, but she had a better grasp of it than that.

The holo-image smiled nastily, showing the teeth again. "Too long. I'll transmit details of the exchange point in 48 hours, and expect to see you in 49. Otherwise, he pulled his hostage back into view, "I'll start slow. If you can't get here by then, don't worry. She'll still be alive if you wait four days."

The feed went black, and Shepard's air of relaxed disinterest vanished.

"Joker, estimated travel time to those coordinates?"

His fingers were flying over his console as Matthews sent him updated system information. The target would be on the far side of its orbit from the relay. Shit. "47 hours if we don't stop to discharge. We'll be damn hot when we get there."

"I need more time, Joker."

"Roger. Matthews, I need to see every other known body of earth-mass or above in that system,
projected positions in the next 24 to 48.” His eyes flicked over the display. *Bingo.* “Got it, Commander. We can be in orbit within 43 hours.”

“Good. Make it happen.”

EDI interrupted. “Mr. Moreau's proposed route includes a gravity-well maneuver.”

“Two, actually,” he corrected distractedly. He was already prepping to leave Tuchanka's orbit, picking his trajectory to shave minutes off the trip to the relay.

“One of those planets has more than thirty mapped satellites. Entering its gravity-well at the speed you're proposing is highly discouraged.”

Shepard snapped, “Your concern has been noted, EDI. Joker?”

“Wouldn't have suggested it if I couldn't pull it off, Commander.”

“If he says he can, he can.” Shepard's orders were terse. "We run silent. All comm access is suspended. Not a blip is leaving this ship. Joker, engage stealth systems the moment we exit the last relay. Chambers, I'll need Garrus, Kasumi, and Tali in the comm room in three hours."

As she turned on her heel to head for the elevator, Chambers finally voiced the question they'd all been thinking, her voice subdued. "Commander… who is the girl?"

Shepard's answer came in one harsh expelled breath, with no explanation.

"Nessie."

Then she strode off the bridge.
Rhi paced around her quarters, trying to bring some clarity to the swirl of her emotions.

Who’s trying to get to me?

Trex?

Someone using him?

Why him?

Why Nessie?

How the hell did anyone even find out about any of it, unless Trex is behind it after all?

Why would he suddenly pull this crap now?

After she’d shot Finch, she’d thought that Geltz was the only person that linked her past on the streets to her present.

Geltz knew about Nessie.

Geltz wouldn’t betray her. He was alliance straight-up. He didn’t play games.

How could anyone find her? I didn’t even know where she was. I didn’t even know her real name.

Rhi Shepard’s break with her past had been total. She hadn’t planned it and she didn’t regret it, but it made it far more unnerving when pieces suddenly started turning up fifteen years later.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the door chime. “Operative Lawson to see you, Shepard.”

Rhi stopped pacing, caught off guard. Miranda never came to see her willingly – calling Shepard to her office was one of her cherished little power plays. Probably here to give me the second half of her ‘forget all past relationships’ lecture. The first half had been delivered on Illium, when she returned from visiting Liara. Rhi hadn’t been sure whether to be angry at her high-handedness or amused that yet another person had misinterpreted her relationship with the asari.

At this rate I should have just taken her to bed anyway. She shuddered. The most mind-blowing sex wasn't worth it if it meant waking up to Liara’s earnest endearments. The young asari took bland to new plateaus.

Miranda was at the door. Right. She sat at her desk. “Enter.”

“Commander Shepard.”

“Miranda, if you’re planning on telling me not to sacrifice the mission for personal grievances, be advised that I have no intention of sacrificing anything… and I’m not changing course.”

Lawson looked surprised, but she recovered quickly. “No, Shepard, I…” She began again. “The girl, Vanessa. She means something to you.”
Vanessa. Rhi tested the name. It didn’t fit.

“Yes.” This is a Cerberus operative. Don’t give away more than you have to.

“Like a little sister, perhaps?”

“That’s… apt.”

“Then I have a favor to ask.”

Rhi listened as Miranda explained about her sister, and how she’d helped her escape their overbearing father. She tried to keep the shock from her eyes. So Miranda is human after all.

“So you want to be there when the family is moved to run interference?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Get me the details you know. We’ll make it happen.”

Miranda had clearly expected her to say no.

“…and, Shepard?”

“Mmm?”

“I’d like to go with you on this one. To get Nessie.”

Rhi regarded her for a long moment before coming to a decision. “Okay, Miranda. You’ll be there.” They clasped hands, not friends, but at least allies, and Lawson took her leave.

Lawson’s interruption had broken her out of the useless circle of whys. It didn’t really matter what Trex wanted. It didn’t really matter how she felt about it. The only things that mattered were getting Nessie out safely and getting on with their far more important mission.

Either she’d have time to process the other crap later, or it would be moot.

I suppose that’s one good thing about missions promising near-certain death. They really help straighten out your priorities.

She chose some music, cranked it, and settled down to do some research. She needed to know what the Reds had become in the almost fifteen years since she’d left. Time to find out how a gang of mostly under-age thieves and drug-runners had turned into an anti-alien hate-group.

——

The unfortunate thing about being a really superb pilot, Joker thought, was that people didn’t notice the really cool stuff you did. People only really noticed crashes.

Except for EDI, the navigator, and Mercer (who had stayed awake specifically to watch the maneuver) he didn’t think anyone noticed quite how deftly he executed the planetary slingshot that so neatly boosted their acceleration – or the matching (and more dangerous) maneuver that slowed them back down.

He was proved wrong by Shepard's terse “Good work, Joker,” on the comm. Apparently the commander hadn't been head-down in her terminal, after all.
It was hard to guess where she'd be at any given time since she'd set them on this course. Over the last forty hours Shepard, Miranda, and other vital crew (including himself) had completely ditched the Normandy's normal artificial day cycle in favor of the more demanding schedule of the mission. Mercer had woken him just before the final relay so he could get them to their cross-system destination, and without his omnitool he wouldn't have a clue what time it was.

His sleep cycle was going to give him hell to pay for it later – he wasn't eighteen any more – but for now, he'd done what he promised. One planet coming up, hostage included. 42 hours and 39 minutes.

The Normandy's ladar was being supplemented by the normal info-bursts from the planet's surface and the relay comm buoy. It didn't get a lot of space traffic, and there were only a handful of man-made satellites in orbit, none natural. He pulled up info on the atmosphere and meteorology and scowled, then radioed Shepard at her post aft in the CIC.

"Commander, there's no sky-clutter and not a lot of atmospheric distortion. If they have any kind of surface optics they'll know we're here."

"We can't risk that. Ideas?"

Mercer cocked her head. "Can't we hide in geosynch?"

"Don't know where they are, or if they're only in one place. If anyone down there is halfway competent, they'll have observation points all around the globe."

An icon alerted him that Shepard had pulled up their near-space scan data on the larger projection area in the CIC.

"Joker, that old station looks awfully pretty. Is the Normandy feelin' friendly?"

She'd seen the orbital debris at the same time he did. Abandoned station. Weather? Mining? The only thing that mattered was it was big.

_Ooh, this is going to get fun._ "She's a cuddler, Commander."

He could _hear_ Shepard's self-satisfied grin. "Fuck 'er like a lover, helmsman."

You could tell the civilian flight crew by who made confused sounds. _When they knew they were working with ex-mil, they really ought to have bought the phrase book._ The original wording of that command had been considerably more chaste, but even the best-planned terminology couldn't survive first contact with a ship full of bored servicemen. Granted, the CO usually didn't stoop to that level, but Shepard did like to surprise people.

"Aye aye, Commander."

He radioed engineering. "About to get sexy up here, Donnelly. Keep 'er reined in. I don't want any surprises."

"Treat 'er gentle, Moreau."

He acted affronted. "I'm a gentleman, jack-ass."

Mercer looked baffled. "Do you all just enjoy being naughty?"

_Naughty? What is she, eight? _"It's a maneuver we don't get to pull often. Now be quiet and watch."
Readings flickered as they neared the abandoned station, giving him its mass, vector, and spin. The derelict's orbit wasn't quite stable, a pain in the ass to match. Awesome.

Flying like this was what made the job worthwhile. Between this and the gravity-well hop earlier, he'd sleep well tonight. Or this morning. Whatever.

The station could be seen by eye, now.

The ship got quieter as the Tantalus core went offline.

"Easy, girl..." he backed off the power.

Closer, closer...

He matched the station's speed, searching the ladar for the right target. There, a nice flattish plane with a few widely-spaced struts. Arms wide open.

He gave the Normandy a nudge, sending her into a spin to match the derelict's, and they closed.

Down to one k.

500 meters.

Mercer was holding her breath.

250.

100 meters, and the Normandy was eerily silent, crew staring out the windows at the looming hunk of metal.

50, gently, gently.

The Normandy slid over the station with a bare ten meters between her hull and the sheltering metal arms. The slightest of retroburns stopped her motion relative to the hulk.

Just another piece of the debris.

Mercer let out her breath, and he realized he'd been holding his.

Shepard's voice on the radio was warm. "Nicely done, Joker. Better give her a cigarette."

Mercer was still trying to master her blush. "Really? That's f... f..."

"We're all grown-ups here."

"...like a lover? I expected something a little more... violent."

"Like a lover, Mercer, not like your tenth grade boyfriend who couldn't find it with a map and a flashlight. It's finesse." His eyes drifted upwards to the struts arcing over head. "Besides, look! They're snuggling."

"Cute." Shepard's amused snort let him know he'd left the radio channel open. "Okay, people, sit tight."

Shepard strode into the debriefing room and a scene of controlled chaos. The normally clear table
was cluttered with laptops, data pads, empty coffee cups, and even real from-a-tree paper scraps.

Her gaze swept the assembled hackers. She hadn't been certain they'd work together well. Putting Tali and Lawson in the same room was a risky move, and most techies seemed to like working alone anyway. She needn't have worried. Garrus and Tali had their heads together, gesturing to a mass of raw data EDI was skimming from the planet below them. Kasumi was perched on the table, face intent on a pad below her. Miranda… well, she had no idea what Miranda was doing, but she looked serious about it.

"Do you have a location for me?" She'd come up with three different plans on the seemingly interminable trip here. Which one she used depended on how soon they could answer that question, and what the answer was.

Lawson looked up from her screen. "Not yet, Commander, but we're down to five possibilities."

"Send me what you have and let me know when you're down to three. We can move on that."

Garrus looked up. "Are you planning on extracting her before the meeting or setting up an ambush?"

"Depends on how soon you can get me that intel."

Miranda chewed at her lower lip. It was a distinctly un-perfect habit. "If you actually go through with the meeting, you could find out what this Trex wants."

Shepard snorted. "Normally, I'd agree with you, but I'm pretty booked up working for one morally reprehensible individual. I don't want to get distracted with another one. Whatever that bastard wants I can worry about after we've dealt with the collectors. I'll add him to the list. "Unless I actually get the chance to take him out, but that won't happen."

"I thought he wanted a face to face meeting?" Tali asked.

Sometimes flashes of Tali's old innocence showed in the most surprising ways.

"He's an asshole, not an idiot. He wants me surrounded by his people. He'll be elsewhere. Maybe even off-world."

"Oh. I thought he, er," the quarian stammered, suddenly uncomfortable, "I didn't mean, but what he said –"

_Hells, did the entire conversation leak its way down to engineering? She'd almost forgotten about that particular bit._

"Hell no, Tali. He's not interested in me. It was just about power. Always was, still is. Trying to see who can make who flinch in front of their people."

Miranda's mouth parted in a smug smile. "If it was a cool contest, I think you won that one."

Rhi raised one eyebrow, letting the corner of her mouth twitch up in a smile. "I usually do."

"Info on five possible locations sent to your terminal, commander."

"Four!" Kasumi said triumphantly. "Loc C is a bunch of mercs. Their encoding is too good to be our mark."

Shepard left them to their work and went back to the CIC. In her head, a clock had been ticking
down since Trex had broken the connection. She needed to move, but first she needed data.

She pulled up the files Miranda had sent her and tried to remember how Trex had thought over ten years ago, trying to remember back to arguments she'd had over tactics before she knew what the word 'tactics' meant. It was no good; anyone would change in that length of time. Better just to imagine what she'd do in that situation.

For starters, I'd have picked a planet with some nice flat plains and a lot more radio traffic. The rock below them housed a few mining settlements, a bit of light manufacturing, and a single merc outpost; the light activity made it comparatively easy to narrow down their possible targets.

She scanned the possible locations, reminding herself that at best, this was where the gang's comm chatter placed their current activity. They could choose anywhere for the hostage drop… unless they wanted to set up an ambush first. Then they needed time as much as she did.

Rhi liked to have a few really good people, people she could rely on. It made it easier to change your plan if things went south. Trex liked numbers. Wherever he was operating, there'd be a lot of chatter.

I'd choose some totally featureless spot and show up with almost no warning. No ambush that way, either direction. Runways were good. The inside of a really big impact crater would work, too. Any place where the nearest cover was out of sniper range.

She had a sudden mental image of Trex on a featureless plain. His face was lifted up to the sky, where the Normandy was screaming down into atmo, ready to make a new crater centered on him.

It was disturbingly appealing. She shivered. To send him and his memory of a very different Rhi Shepard to hell without even getting the dirt of this crapsack little world on her feet, erasing him and his thugs in one beautiful blaze of overkill.

But Nessie was down there.

No, Trex would have cover, and he'd have his people in position early, planning to get the jump on her. Probably had it set up for days. That meant one of their four possible locations was the exchange site, and one was where Nessie was being held now.

The trouble, of course, was knowing which was which.

Rhi put that problem aside and went forward to talk to Joker.

“I need to get a team planet-side without detection. Ideas?”

“Where?”

Good question. “For now, any of these four sites.” She sent him the coordinates. “They shouldn’t know we’re here yet, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t looking.” She outlined her plan.

“Hmm.” His stared into space, thinking. “Might be able to come in as normal traffic. We can shoot the Kodiak out in our own shadow and have it come back from a different vector. Or,” he was tapping out a complex rhythm on the arm of his chair as he thought; she wondered if he knew he was doing it, “Better yet, we head out as soon as you have all your data. The Normandy is faster than the kodiak; we can make the fuel depot in half an hour. No one will notice a shuttle leaving from there, and when your message arrives, the Normandy's only half-an-hour away and looks like she just got in-system.”
“In fact,” he turned to her, green eyes lit up with cocky pride, “with the time I shaved off our trip across the system, you should be getting your little telephone call from the long-lost friend just about when he'd expect you to arrive at the fuel depot under normal travel. If he has any way of monitoring the relay, it'll match.”

“Wow, that's a piece of luck.”

“Luck? Please, Commander. I am just that good.”

She couldn't help but return his grin, though his was smug and hers warm. For a split second, worries about Ness and Trex drifted away, and it was just her and her pilot, doing what they were best at.

“You're right, Joker. You are just that good.” She touched his shoulder lightly in thanks and turned to go. She didn't want to, but there was work to do. “Be ready to move on my order.”

Back in the comm room, the tech team was still working diligently. Miranda looked up when she came in, a look of restrained triumph on her face.

“Location E is their headquarters, Commander. It has to be.”

She ran over what she'd read on Loc E and discarded the idea of an early extraction. “Good to know. Scratch that one off the list, then.”

“Excuse me?”

“It's probably where Ness is now, but not where she'll be in,” Rhi checked her omni tool, “Five hours. Trex would never invite an enemy into his lair – even if he isn't in it, personally.” She pulled up the remaining locations on the table's central projector. “Do we have topographics?”

Garrus clacked his mandibles together in satisfaction. “Even better. Floor plans for locs A and B. They're out of date, but it's a start.”

*We're down to three possibilities.*

“Okay. You've got fifteen more minutes to scrape every last bit of data you can before we leave orbit. Joker, you got that?”

“Breaking in fifteen, Commander.”

She waited until they were underway to explain her plan; she wanted them to make good use of that quarter hour, and that meant no interruptions. Then she assembled the entire team in the comm room.

“We have three possible locations. Each of these sites already has Trex’s people crawling over it; he’ll almost certainly have snipers to cover me and the hostage.” She grinned. “We're going to do a swap. His people for mine.”

“At which spot?”

“All of them. Garrus, Thane, Zaeed: three snipers, three locations. I want you ready and waiting when Ness shows up, wherever she shows up. Garrus, head for A. Kasumi: you're with Thane on B. It's likely he'll need your skills to get to his position. Zaeed, you and Jack will cover loc D.” It was the only undeveloped site, and privately Shepard thought it the least likely. If she had to guess, she'd say it was an illicit landing field.
“Samara,” she tried not to let her hesitation show in her voice; she didn't think her request was going to go over well with the Justicar. “Biotics are invaluable in hostage situations, and I'd like you down there with Garrus, but you stick out like a sore thumb.” A bruised blue sore thumb. Here goes nothing. “Asari maiden mercs are a pretty common sight, though. I'd like you to wear more normal combat armor.”

“Of course, Shepard. I shall endeavor to act the part.”

Rhi had been braced for an argument about the honor and traditions of the justicars; she felt rather like she'd been pushing on a door and someone had opened it from the other side. Samara had agreed in the same flat tone she said everything, which didn't bode well for her acting skills, but it was a start.

“B and D aren't too far from each other or the spaceport. Mercer will drop you and you'll make your own way. A is at a different settlement – Mercer, find somewhere to land and head to a bar. You're a weary pilot on R&R, not a taxi service.”

“Can do, Commander!” The young pilot sounded positively bubbly about her part in the subterfuge.

“Okay, team. You'll have about four hours to get in, remove anyone in the way, and be in position by the time I show up.”

“When do you show up?”

“Right when Trex expects me to – after he's given me the actual location, minutes before the time's up. I want it to look like I'm playing his game until the moment I signal you.”

"Is anyone else going to point out that this plan has Shepard walking into a den of terrorists with a whole lotta guns aimed at her?" Joker's voice crackled over the radio. “’Cause if not, I am. I mean, I know all the Cerberus peeps are used to the whole 'terrorist' thing, it'll be like old-home week, but they sound like some pretty sick shits.”

Miranda looked ready to strangle him over the comm. Shepard quelled her with a glance and kept her own voice light.

"What's the matter, Joker, you starting to feel sorry for 'em? Think I should give 'em some warning?"

"See, Commander, that'd be playing fair. You'd think they'd know by now that you could take 'em out with one hand behind your back."

Shepard smiled to herself, but Joker kept going.

"So have you considered the possibility that they'll tie both hands? I mean, seriously, they're not gonna let you waltz in there armed."

Garrus muttered "Damn, I didn't realize waltzing was in the plan. I should have taken that enrichment course after all."

Kasumi started tapping out a 1-2-3 1-2-3 beat on the table.

"That's why I'm taking Miranda with me."

Garrus looked startled. “Waltzing?”
“Focus, people!” Shepard snapped. “Lawson's capable enough without a gun. With any luck, they won't think to remove my amp, either, but I'm not counting on it. If we play our cards right, we have surprise and four people – that's more than I had to take down Saren.”

"And the 'come alone' part?"

"If I don't try to pull something over on 'em, they'll wonder where the hidden snipers are." Shepard grinned wolfishly. "I'm hoping they feel smug enough about taking my weapons that they think a second's the only other planning I did."

"That's a lot of ifs, Commander." Joker didn't sound convinced.

Jack spat. *I'll have to get Gardner to clean this room up pronto.* "So there's a pretty plan, something starts to go wrong, and we blow the hell outta shit until it's richly f*cked up. Business as usual. What's the f*cking problem?"

“Yeah, business as usual.” Joker clicked his tongue. “Shepard, you really have to rewrite our Standard Operating Procedures one of these days. You forgot *step 4: Profit!*”

The kodiak hadn’t been visible to the naked eye for upwards of fifteen minutes, but the Commander was still in the cockpit, pacing restlessly. The twitchiness had started as soon as the shuttle was away.

Shepard was normally the picture of cool command. Even when she was off-duty she moved without wasted energy, and when she was working she projected a deep, focused calm that permeated the crew. It made her apparent nerves now doubly jarring.

Finally Joker couldn't take it anymore.

"Not used to staying behind, are you, Commander?"

For a moment he thought she'd snap at him, but she stilled herself and sighed instead. "Not when they're out on my order, no." She shrugged ruefully. “Hurry-up-and-wait’s pretty standard drill, otherwise.”

That military truism had been accurate for so long it was hardly worth repeating.

He gestured at the chair next to him. “Sit down, chill out. You'll get the bastards.”

She stood indecisively for a moment, then folded into the chair and let out a deep breath.

“So…” he started talking to distract her, and realized he had no idea what he was going to say.

The mysterious Vanessa and her mysterious relationship to Shepard had been the talk of crew quarters since she first showed up on the comm, but his own curiosity was overpowered by his contrariness. When three different people had begged him to ask Shepard who Vanessa was, he'd decided he wouldn't pry. If she wanted to, she'd tell him. But ignoring the elephant in the room didn't leave many options for conversation.

“…how 'bout that local sports team?” he finished lamely.

Shepard raised one eyebrow. "Really, Joker?"

He shrugged, grinning sheepishly. “Three hours, twenty minutes. Got a deck of cards?”
The exchange site was a labyrinthine building; part of a complex of warehouses and offices that had been slammed together, repurposed, and repurposed again as the planet’s population grew. Somewhere in that maze were Thane and Kasumi… and unless Trex had played her false, Nessie.

After the call that confirmed the meeting location, Joker had taken the *Normandy* down as close to the building as he could. As she and Miranda walked away, she braced herself against the wind of its departure. Like hell she was going to leave her ship grounded in a trap.

Six armored figures waited for them.

“Looks like they rolled out the welcome wagon,” she muttered to Miranda.

Four of the guards escorted them into the building. The other two remained outside. In the anteroom they demanded their weapons.

Shepard snorted. “Not unless I know Ness is alive.”

One of them nodded and turned on an omnitool, playing a projection of the girl's face, eyes rolling from side to side. It was a close-up shot, with no indication of where she was.

“Bullshit. You play me some recorded video and expect that to convince me? I see her alive, healthy, and here, or I put a bullet in your face and walk out that door.”

Rhi sat back on her heels with her arms crossed while the man strode to the other side of the room and muttered through his radio. He returned and pulled up the omnitool again. “He says you can talk to her. Then you know it's real-time.”

“And I know it's *here* how?”

Lawson had her own omnitool out. “It's a close-signal, Shepard. From in this building.”

Shepard nodded and addressed the projection. “Nessie. Wink twice for me.”

She did. It was as good as they were going to get. Two of the guards took their guns and Shepard's helmet and vanished behind another door.

She was still confident as they walked down the corridor, despite being armed only with a hidden switchblade. Her team was good; they’d be in position, and Trex’s people hadn’t thought to remove her amp. The general populace's ignorance of biotics could come in handy, sometimes.

They’d have to move fast, but they’d moved fast before.

Then Rhi Shepard stepped through a door and saw Nessie for the first time in over ten years, and her heart sunk in her chest.
Chapter 16

With Shepard’s helmet off, Joker was robbed of his normal video feed. Luckily, Miranda had a tiny pick-up on her collar. The quality was crap compared to the high-end equipment built into Shepard’s helmet, but at least he wasn’t blind and deaf.

Shepard and Lawson had entered a dim room at least two stories high and big enough to echo. The center was dominated by a large holo-projection unit, displaying the gang leader standing with his arms crossed. Shepard had been right when she guessed he wouldn’t show in person.

On a low platform just below the projection was the girl, Nessie, bound and gagged. She was tied to a case of explosives.

In the projection, the man Trex smiled smugly, looking down at Shepard, and hefted the detonation switch in his palm.

Joker’s eyes widened in horror. The carefully placed snipers were useless. The finger on the trigger was in another place. He wished Miranda would turn so he could see Shepard’s face, even though he knew she wouldn’t let her thoughts show. She’d never let her enemy know he’d won.

Trex stretched lazily and smiled his alloy-filled smile. “‘Mornin’, Rhi.” His image was larger-than-life.

*He set it up so he looks ten feet tall. What a petty bastard.*

*Shit. How were they going to get out of this? “Edi! Can you get me a trace on that trigger signal?”

Mercer was still down there. If she could pick up one or both of the extra teams and get them to Trex’s location, could they take him out before he got suspicious? *No. Better to hit the transmitter – “Attempting trace.”*

Miranda stepped back a pace, so Joker was able to see Shepard as she crossed her arms over her chest. The commander’s eyes never dropped to the girl bound to the explosives. When he glimpsed her face it was as impassive as he’d known it would be.

“How were they going to get out of this? “Edi! Can you get me a trace on that trigger signal?”

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“Now, just to make sure this stays a friendly meeting, I had my people set this up as a dead-man switch.” Trex hefted the detonator device. His thumb was pressed firmly to the button. “If I have an unfortunate accident, so does Vanessa. And so do you.” He grinned the nasty grin again. “I don’t like under-doing things with explosives.”

Going for Trex would end in Shepard being blown sky-high. *SHIT! No, no no no no. Scratch that plan. There has to be another way around this!*

Shepard kept her face clear of emotion, but inside she was raging. She was angry at herself for thinking she'd out-planned her adversary; angry at the situation for being so damn ridiculous when there were collectors and reapers and who-knows-what-else to fight; and angry at Trex for being even more of a smug asshole than she’d remembered.
Above her head, her old gang-leader leaned back and pretended to be casual. She tried not to focus too obviously on the detonator switch in his hand.

“So, now that we have that out of the way, how’ve you been?” he asked.

“Dead.”

Trex rolled his eyes. “Don’t give me that bullshit, Shepard. Did you finally get tired of the Alliance goody-two shoes act and give them the slip, or were you undercover for the blues?”

She felt a surge of irritation. My friends don't believe, why would my enemies? It wasn't important... but maybe if she pressed the point she could keep him talking. His total inability to get to the fucking point would have been irritating if it wasn't her only hope of coming up with some kind of plan.

“Neither. I died.”

“What the hell? You get religion or some shit, Rhi? This all fuckin' metaphorical?”

She glanced back at Miranda and nodded slightly.

“Full brain death,” Lawson said, “Severe damage to almost all major vital systems. Reconstruction took two years.”

“And this was two years ago? Huh. I thought you'd gone brain-dead when you ran off with her.”

He jerked a thumb in Nessie's direction.

Rhi smiled. “That's a cheap shot, even for you. You never did figure out that people work for you better if you take care of them, did you? I don't like seeing people die for no reason, Trex.”

Joker barely noticed Chambers sit down next to him to watch the feed. His brain was moving to fast, discarding one option after another. “EDI, chances of hacking that connection without letting the signal drop?”

“Impossible without access to the hardware at one end of the transmission.”

Shit shit shit. “Zaeed! We need more options. Head to loc B. I'll outline the situation on the way.”

“Already half-way there, Moreau. Think we'd hang out in a bloody field when things were getting lively? Not a bleedin' chance.”

“You don't?” Trex sneered. “Maybe you shoulda thought of that before you sold us out to the man. Bad enough that you were a soft idiot, but you just had to squeal too, didn't you. We lost three good people when they came for us, Rhi. Remember Jen? Sun-Yung? Dead. And Finch and I spent five years inside. All so you could play the hero for one little girl.”

She hadn't known that. Hadn't known anything at all about what became of the Reds after she'd left. Sun-Yung had been one of the ones to help her when she was just a kid. She...

Grieve later, Shepard.

“Don't blame me because you got sloppy, Trex. I never told anyone a damn thing, and believe me,
they asked. All I did was look out for one of our own. If you'd done the same instead of going after more drug money, we coulda stayed below the radar forever. Jen and Sun deserved better from you. So did Nessie.” She glanced towards the hostage. “So does Nessie.”

“What the hell, you think I wanted her to get hurt? I don't don't want her hurt now. She was one of mine. If you hadn't shot Finch, it would never have come to this.”

Always trying to shift the blame, bastard. “Bullshit. She was never one of yours. And if you cared about hurting your people, you wouldn't have them in the same room as a shitload of rigged explosives. What's the deal?” Shepard gestured broadly around the room. “These guys piss you off?”

She didn't think she'd win them over, and she didn't know how it would help if she could, but any straw was worth grasping at. She and Miranda could probably dive for the door and fight their way out, but it would mean losing Ness… and maybe, depending on where they were hiding, Kasumi and Thane. She had no radio; she couldn't warn them.

For just a moment, she let her gaze drop to the young woman on the platform. Dirty roots showed in her dyed hair, and a tear was glistening at the edge of her blackened eye. There was nothing familiar about her, but it was Nessie.

You don't even know her, not really.

Rhi shoved the thought away. I didn't save her life fifteen years ago just to have her die because of me now. She just had to think of something…

___

Joker flipped through secondary feeds, always keeping an eye on Miranda's, hoping something would inspire a plan. Shepard was talking about things he didn't know about and couldn't follow, parts of her past that weren't in any publicly available file. As he listened, his fingers went on autopilot, and he flipped on a feed he knew was dead.

Shepard's helmet.

It was still transmitting.

In the crystal-clear video he could see the confiscated weapons: both heavy pistols, an SMG, Shepard's shotgun being examined greedily by an armed skinhead…

…and a huge bank of top-of-the-line communications equipment, humming gently.

The helmet was still transmitting its location.

He opened Shepard's channel. “Keep stalling!”

“Kasumi! Transmitting location of the comm equipment. Down a story, north of your position. Can you get there?” She'd spent the ride to the fuel depot memorizing the building's layout.

“No problem. How many marks?”

He'd always been able to follow more than one musical line at once; it was a talent that was surprisingly useful when it came to parsing multiple radio inputs. He had the helmet feed running in his other ear, and he could hear a second voice. “At least two hostiles. Maybe more.”
“Already on my way. I might be able to take two, but if there're more I won't be able to neutralize them before they get off an alarm.”

“Roger, working on it.” He switched channels. “Zaeed, where are you?”

“Outside your goddamn mousetrap. Should I take out the two at the door and join the party?”

“No! Low profile, Massani. I'm sending you Kasumi.”

“Gotcha.”

“Goto, can you get Zaeed in the way you did Thane?”

“Ye-es.” There was a moment's thoughtful silence. “We shouldn't even have to dislocate his shoulders. I think.”

Rhi was starting to think she'd have to agree to whatever Trex wanted. *I'll get Ness, get out of here, and he'll realize I lied later.*

“What do you want, Trex?”

“Just a little help for an old friend. You can get to a few places we have trouble reaching. The Citadel tower, for instance. There are a few packages I'd like delivered.”

“These packages don't come with transceivers and detonators by any chance, do they?”

He smiled. “Clever girl.”

*And after I went to all that trouble to make sure the Citadel wasn't destroyed, too.* “What the hell you got against the Council?” *Or all the other people in the tower who aren't political ass-kissers, for that matter?* Aside from Anderson she wasn't exactly on good terms with the leaders of Citadel Space, but that didn't mean she was going to help kill all the innocents who surrounded them.

“Don't know why that should matter to you. After all, you left the Reds.”

It wasn't the time to point out that she hadn't actually left the gang by choice. “And if I do this? What then?”

“Then you get Nessie back.”

“What?!”

“You heard me. I'm not giving you the chance to welch on a deal, Shepard.”

*And there goes plan B.*

Suddenly, wonderfully, beautifully, Joker's voice crackled in her ear.

She couldn’t acknowledge. He’d just have to hope she'd heard. For a brief instant Shepard’s eyes were looking through Miranda’s feed, right at him. It was only a glance; he doubted anyone else in
the room realized she’d looked at Miranda’s collar instead of her face.

It was as good as they were going to get.

“Kasumi?”

“Standing by.”

“Three. Two. One. Mark!”

A split second after his mark he heard Shepard curse at Trex. That particular curse was the signal she’d worked out with the snipers, and it was followed almost immediately by a burst of noise and a shower of red, as Thane took out the man nearest to the commander.

—

Rhi had already been gathering herself for a charge. When she heard the crack-boom of Thane's rifle she launched at the man near Nessie, all biotic fury and a shining switch blade, trusting the sniper to have hit his target. She slammed into hers, and in the one still second of crystal clarity, she drove her knife past a piece of shattered armor and up into his gut, twisting. A red flood poured out over her gauntlet. The air was full of the warm coppery scent of blood.

Shepard pushed the dying man off her blade and spun towards Nessie, trusting Thane and Miranda to keep the nearest thugs off of her. Red dripped off the switchblade as she yanked it through the first of the tough plastic bonds around Ness's ankle.

A bright blue flash went off in the corner of her vision; Miranda dealing with someone's shields. A man was running towards her as she cut the second strap. His knee collapsed in a shower of pink mist. Another had made it all the way to the platform where she knelt, though. She stopped sawing long enough to kick him in the face, and he fell backwards clutching a broken nose.

More of Trex's thugs were streaming in. She needed a gun. She needed time. She didn't know how much of her four minutes remained; if she'd kept her helmet there'd have been a countdown in the HUD.

A flash of motion above her caught her eye, and she glanced up. Ness was wiggling the fingers of her right hand and rolling her eyes. Her face strained against the tight tape gag.

Oh, good girl, Ness.

Rhi switched to the straps on her wrist, running the blade up them to the hilt and parting them with one solid tug. The one around her elbow was tighter, harder to work the blade under, and she flattened herself against the crate and its deadly payload while she worked. Finally, Nessie's arm dropped, unconstrained.

Rhi ran her hands roughly down Nessie's arm, helping to restore the blood-flow, then pressed the contoured plastic hilt of the switchblade into the girl's hand and turned to the fight.

There were five people running at her, and Nessie had her knife. Should have taken the weapon off the guy you stabbed. Idiot. She'd been too intent on freeing Ness.

She braced herself and pulled on the eezo tied to her nerves, imagining power flowing down her arm and coalescing in her right hand. She flung the loose ball of energy as if she was skipping a stone.
The wave of force she unleashed sent four of her five attackers flying. There was no control or finesse to it. One went five feet, another ten. One was hurled into the air and landed behind the crate Lawson was using as cover, earning her a sarcastic shout of "Thanks, Shepard."

That still left one woman, and she had a gun.

As gun she was aiming at Shepard. No. At Nessie.

If it hit the explosives, they could all go up.

Rhi shouted to get Thane's attention, but there was no time. She couldn't charge unless she could catch her breath. Time seemed to slow as she made her decision.

She dove between the gun-woman and her target. The solid hit took down all her barriers at once and knocked the wind out of her, but by the time bullet hit armor it had spent its force on her shields.

That would only work once, but it bought enough time for Thane to put a bullet in her attacker's skull.

Rhi surged to her feet, intending to grab a weapon from one of the bodies. Three of the four she'd thrown were back on their feet, and more were coming, at least three from the right and two more at the dimly lit main entrance –

Assault rifle and machine gun fire erupted from the shadows of the main door, taking down three of the attackers headed her way before they knew what hit them.

Ah. Those were her two, then.

Zaeed hefted a gun in each hand. "Sorry we're late. Bleedin' traffic."

Jack stepped out from behind him, shouted "PARTY ON, MOTHERFUCKERS!" and sent another thug flying. She closed the distance between herself and Shepard with one biotics-assisted jump, and Rhi found her hands folding around her own shotgun.

This is more like it.

She shouted at Jack to help Ness before they were all blown to hell, and charged into the fray.

Joker watched Shepard charge, her form glowing blue, on the platform one instant and halfway across the room the next. On one of his monitors, their four minutes were ticking down. Less than two minutes, now.

Kasumi had disappeared, heading back to the crawl-ways to watch Thane's back. The drell was still firing from hiding, but there was too much close-quarters fighting for him to be as effective as he'd been.

Jack and Ness between them finally cut the last of her bonds. She didn't even have time to collapse onto the platform before one of the biotics flung her across the room towards the cover Miranda had claimed. Jack snapped the knife closed and tossed it to Shepard, who caught it and ducked just before a spray of bullets took out her shields.

Then Shepard was up again, sighting on the man who'd fired at her. The first round took out his
armor, and she was preparing for a second. She didn't seem to notice the woman coming from behind her, and the shotgun's heat-sink had to be near capacity.

“Shepard, SIX!” In his fear, his voice was far too loud for her earpiece.

Shepard squeezed off her shot, whirled, and shoved the switchblade into the woman's trachea. Drops of red blood spattered her face. Joker could see the woman's mouth working as she fell. He was glad he couldn't hear whatever sound she was making.

He checked the timer. “One minute, Commander!”

“40 seconds, Commander!”

Rhi's ear was still ringing from Joker's warning shout, but she wasn't about to complain. The fight had become a brawl, and she was having trouble keeping track of who was where.

“Head for the door!” Without a radio she had to bellow to make herself heard. A quick glance showed Miranda guiding a stumbling Ness towards the hallway while Zaeed laid down cover fire. The shots from above had stopped; Thane must have heard her order as well. Jack was already ahead, clearing a path.

She turned back towards the middle of the room to act as rear-guard.

“Twenty seconds!”

She rolled away from a rain of bullets and came up firing. The last of her team had reached the doorway. Her shields buzzed and went out, but there was no cover nearby, so all she could do was move, diving sideways.

“Ten!”

She caught a flicker of motion in her peripheral. Someone had circled wide around her, heading for her team. Heading for Ness.

“Five! Move, Shepard!”

There were too many, and they were almost on top of her. The shotgun wasn't fast enough, and the bomb was about to go off. She took a deep breath and turned her back on her approaching enemies, looking at the thug hunting her people.

Electric blue gathered around her. She unleashed the biotic surge, flinging herself forward, away, out of reach, at the receding figure of the man in the hallway. The impact sent him reeling backwards to the ground, and she fell on top of him, knife slippery in her hand. She slammed the butt of her shotgun into the inside of his elbow, and blade of the knife into his eye. Then she doubled over astride the corpse, panting.

“Zero.”

The explosion rattled the building to its foundations, filling the air with dust and noise. Shepard felt the wave of heat on her back, and bright light illuminated the dim hallway.

She looked up from the dead man into Nessie's eyes and smiled. “Hey, kid.”
Joker's heart-rate was as high as it had been when they escaped the collector ship. Only the commander's biotic speed had gotten her clear of the explosion that took out her pursuers. *My fault. If I hadn't shouted her deaf she would have heard the one-minute warning.*

“Mercer! Head to these coordinates for pick-up. I'll be right behind you.” The shuttle could get closer than the *Normandy*, and he wanted to be in the air, where he could slag the whole complex if he needed to.

On screen, Shepard's squad was regrouping after the shock of the explosion. Thane and Kasumi had dropped from behind a ceiling panel practically on top of them, totally unscathed. They were the only ones so lucky, but it didn't look like any of the injuries were serious.

“Can you walk?” Shepard asked the Nessie.

The girl looked beyond exhausted, and blood was soaking through her dress. She nodded once, gamely, took a step towards the exit, and collapsed.

He heard her whimper “Shit,” in a quiet, frustrated voice, then Shepard was there, laying a hand on her shoulder. The commander unshipped the guns from her back, passing them out to her bemused squad. Nessie looked up with an odd smile; tired, wondering, happy, and Shepard met her eyes and matched it.

Then Shepard turned to face away from her and knelt on one knee in the dust and blood. The girl staggered upright and wrapped her arms around Shepard's neck, and the commander slipped her hands back, boosted her up, and stood.

Neither spoke a word.

Shepard grunted once, resettling the girl on her back, then nodded to her squad. “We’re done here. Move out.”

They fanned out to shield her and she started for the door, Nessie’s head sagging to rest on her shoulder.

Joker had almost forgotten Chambers sitting quietly next to him. In a hushed voice, she said “That was so tender. It’s almost beautiful, except –”

“Except they’re both *covered* in blood,” he finished for her. But despite the odd feeling of solemnity, of having witnessed something he didn’t understand, they’d *won*, and he’d been instrumental in that victory. So he added “And the blood-soaked look is *so* last year.”

EDI's calm voice interrupted his thoughts. “That was well done, Mr. Moreau. I believe one might say that your intervention 'Saved the Day'.”

He shook himself. “We aren't quite out of the woods yet, thing. EDI.”

Then he turned the *Normandy’s* nose planet-ward and went to pick up Shepard.
Shepard crouched on the floor of the battered foyer and listened to Zaeed's report.

"Ten, looks like assault rifles. Variable armor." The mercenary was peering out around a fallen beam. "Where's he pullin' these guys from?"

Shepard didn't know, and she didn't care. It was just another barrier between her and the Normandy. Between her and home. She picked her helmet up off the floor and turned it so she could talk into the radio. "Joker, come in."

"Mercer's on her way, Commander."

"Tell her to hold off. We've got company we have to deal with first." She hoped her voice didn't betray how tired she was. "I'll have Thane stay back with Ness while the rest of us clear those ten. Jack and I should be able to knock them off balance for awhile, and..."

"How many?"

"10." She glanced up to see Zaeed shake his head and hold up two fingers. "12. Ready and waiting for us."

In the cockpit, Joker checked and rechecked the area's topography. The SR2 was a beast of a ship, big for a frigate, but he'd already set her down outside the warehouse once. It was a fairly clear landing field.

"Commander. Want me to scare 'em for you?"

"Go for it."

"Roger. Hunker down." He switched channels. "Mercer, behind and above the Normandy. Come down in the space we clear."

"Roger."

"Mr. Moreau, I have run several simulations, and none of the possible courses of action with the desired effect are within safe operating parameters." EDI sounded disapproving, but then, she usually did.

"Yup!"

"What exactly is your plan?"

"This!" He grinned as he pulled the Normandy into a fast shallow descent.

Damn, it was a good day to fly.
Shepard joined Zaeed by the door, covered by the shadows of the entry-way. Kasumi had checked on the route she'd used to get in and found it damaged by the explosion. The thugs outside knew where they were and knew they had to come out. She didn't want to throw her people at a prepared line. If Joker could throw them off guard for a few seconds...

Eezo-drive ships were surprisingly quiet in atmo, their reduced mass requiring significantly less thruster power than a pre-mass-effect vehicle. There was only a dull roar as the Normandy flashed over the horizon, headed straight for them.

"Get ready to head out, team. Same formation as before. Ness, with me." She boosted the girl back up onto her back and got ready to run.

Miranda joined them at the door and hissed, "He's insane! That's too low!" Her voice rose in pitch to near panic as she asked, “Do you have any idea how expensive that ship was?"

Shepard noticed that Lawson wasn't worried about all the people on board, but it didn't matter. Outside, the thugs were staring at the massive frigate bearing down on them, bright blue energy flickering in her gun ports.

Not that she'd need guns. She was flying so low they'd be blown away by the backdraft.

"He's going to clip that building with the port wing, you can see it –"

The Normandy banked ever-so-slightly, and the wing in question cleared by less than a meter.

"Take cover!" Shepard hunched behind the door frame.

The group outside broke, running in every direction. One was thoughtless enough to run towards the group huddled in the doorway, and went down to a round from Zaeed's rifle.

A few weren't fast enough. The Normandy was on them in a second, directly over-head and then gone, the sound of the thrusters torn away by the wind of her passage. The stragglers were picked up by the back-draft and pulled along in the ship's wake, bodies tumbling helplessly through the air.

A moment later, the kodiak dropped from above and settled perfectly in the cleared space.

One mad dash later, and they were all safely in the shuttle.

Rhi set Ness down and collapsed next to her, a huge grin spreading over her face. Joker, you amazing, wonderful man, that was better than the damn volcano . She wondered just how far she could stretch 'command appropriate appreciation' for that little maneuver. She'd never seen a ship that big fly that low for that long. It was impressive. It was hot .

Miranda rounded on her. "We were almost blown up, these two," she gestured at Jack and Zaeed, "showed up when they were told to stay put, your precious pilot almost crashed our ship, and you're grinning like a maniac!"

Rhi grinned at her like a maniac.

"Shepard!" She sounded pissed.

"Miranda! We weren't blown up, those two saved our asses , and Joker would never crash his ship. Anything else can be saved for the debriefing."
The door to the cockpit was open and Mercer chimed in, her enthusiasm overcoming her normal shyness. "Of course he wouldn't! That was awesome!"

"Well, I'm happy to be out of there." Ness looked up from where she'd collapsed bonelessly against the bulkhead. "Rhi. Is that really you?"

Rhi was still running on an adrenaline high. "Nope, some other idiot with a past with that asshole," she jerked a thumb back towards the base, "who recognizes your gunshot wounds. Of course it's me. Is it really you?"

Nessie laughed, a sound just on the sane side of hysteria. "You used to steal me doughnuts out of the corner store by the closed theatre. I always wanted the rainbow-colored sprinkles because they were pretty, even though they were totally disgusting and I always ended up picking them off. You got mad once because you had sprinkles in your bed and couldn't sleep —" she yawned. "Sleep. I don't know when I last did that."

Shepard leaned back against the wall and put an arm around her shoulder. "S'okay, kid. You can sleep all the way home. Save the talking for later."

Joker whooped as he pulled the Normandy out of atmo, drowning out the sound of EDI listing flight regulations (civilian and military, by article and section) he'd just broken. Back in navigation Matthews whooped as well, laughing.

"Mercer, ready for rendez-vous?"

"Ready, sir. That was awesome!"

Joker smiled and ran a finger down the side of his console. "You done good, baby," he murmured to the ship, and guided the Normandy to scoop up the shuttle. Chakwas and an assistant were already waiting for the ground team in the hangar.

Matthews turned to Joker and raised his voice to carry down the length of the corridor. "Man, that was insane! What's the commander going to say?"

"Shepard?" Joker glanced back over his shoulder. Shepard was willing to give her crew quite a bit of wiggle room as long as they were competent; it was one of the reasons he liked flying for her. "Why would she say anything?"

"It appears you did not hear the list of regulations and protocols I just completed reading, Mr. Moreau. Perhaps you were otherwise occupied; shall I recommence?"

"Shit, no, EDI! Shut up."

Matthews chuckled. "Dude, you're nuts. Good, but nuts!"

Joker sighed. "No, I'm not 'good.' I'm –"

"– the best."

He almost jumped out of his chair. How the hell had Shepard managed to sneak up on him in full armor? She was standing behind him, apparently unconcerned with the drying blood covering her arms and chest. She'd cleaned her face, at least. The last time he'd seen her on screen she'd been spattered with it.
"That was fantastic," Shepard said. Her grin practically glowed, and he smiled back. "You should check the mission video so you can see it from the outside. Too bad I can't get you a medal. What do civilians get? Money? Don't have any of that, either."

"A raise and a corner office?"

"Shepard, you may want to examine the infractions Mr. Moreau has just incurred. I've forwarded a full list to your omnitool."

"Leave it, EDI. It's not like he's going to try it on Illium."

Joker shrugged. "Oh, I don't know, clip a few towers, scare the blue off traffic control..." he turned back to his console. "We need a discharge point soonest. What's our heading?"

His chair creaked a bit as she leaned on the back. He could smell sweat, smoke, and blood. It should have been disgusting; instead it was heady, the smell of her exertion fresh enough that it was primal rather than filthy.

"Discharge near a com-buoy if you can; otherwise use your discretion. I don't want to hang out around this rock."

He busied himself finding an appropriate destination and setting their course. The mundane task made it marginally easier to ignore the way her scent had gone straight to his brain-stem.

"Got it. ETA two hours, discharge'll take about six. How's the damsel in distress?"

"Fine. A few scrapes and some bad bruises, but mostly trauma and exhaustion. The doc's looking after her." The chair creaked again as Shepard shifted. "EDI, forward the mission vid to my terminal and schedule a debriefing for... damn. What time is it, anyway?"

"1700, commander."

"For tomorrow morning, then, 0900." She stood up. "Joker, let me know as soon as we're in range of that buoy. I'll need secure lines to Anderson and Liara. I'm hoping to head for Illium, but I need to talk to T'soni first. And thanks again. That was a beautiful bit of flying."

"Nothing to it... if you're brilliant." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Uh, Commander?"

"Yes?"

He tapped his left temple. "You missed a bit."

She blinked and raised her hand to her face. It came away red-brown. "Oops. I really am disgusting. Better take care of that." She chuckled.

"See ya, Commander."

As she strode out of earshot, he heard Matthews say "Damn, man. That just isn't fair."

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Joker spent some time cutting the mission vid to just the useful stuff. It wasn't his job, exactly... or at all... but he thought he'd have a better idea of what Shepard'd want to see than anyone else. She really didn't need to waste two hours listening to Garrus try to make small talk with Samara while they waited at the wrong site, for instance, though he did leave in a few bits that were so painful they were funny, just for flavor. Garrus had really tried.
EDI forwarded each segment as he finished his review. She was against his editing in the first place, but it wasn't like Shepard couldn't access the full log if she wanted to bore herself to tears. Maybe he'd package the cut bits and send it to her as a sleep-aid.

His own sleep-schedule really had gotten messed up by that mad dash, and he was still floating on an adrenaline high and the rush of success, so he didn't realize that he'd once again worked through dinner until his stomach growled at him. He sent a message to Mercer noting that they still had two hours of discharge left before they could head to Illium and went down to make himself something to eat.

He yawned as he left the elevator and turned into the darkened mess, thankful that no one would be there at this hour, then stopped in his tracks. The sound of deep, regular breathing alerted him to the fact that Shepard was sprawled at the mess table, head cradled on her arms.

He walked to the galley as quietly as he could, giving her a wide berth. He didn't know why she was asleep in the middle of the mess, but he didn't want to be the one to wake her. He'd thought she'd be in her quarters, or with Chakwas, waiting for the girl to wake up. He glanced over his shoulder, towards the medbay, and saw the doctor standing in the window making exaggerated shushing gestures at him.

He mouthed "Duh!" back at her. When that didn't work, he tried "I know." Then he gave it up as a lost cause and went back to finding some dinner. Gardner had attempted to organize his cabinets, but they weren't tidy by any means. He was careful to make sure nothing fell when he opened the doors and pulled a container of diced onions from the cooler.

A moment later Chakwas appeared silently beside him. He raised an eyebrow at her.

She looked a little sheepish and whispered, "I had to dose her to get her to sleep."

"You drugged Shepard?"

"She was driving me batty waiting for Vanessa to wake up." The doctor opened a cabinet and pulled out a mug. "She's usually a model of patience."

"Still, you drugged her?" He kept his voice low. "Brave lady."

"Only a little bit. She needed sleep just as much as the girl. Then she came out here to grab snack and," she nodded towards the form at the table, "it must have kicked in."

Heh. Wonder if it was the doc's meds or the logs that finally did it? "You looking for a late dinner, doc?"

"Oh, no, just a cup of tea for me."

He nodded toward the sleeping Shepard. "Did she eat?"

"Not much, but there's ration bars aplenty when she wakes up." The doctor sighed. "Heaven knows no one else will eat them."

He wrinkled his nose in distaste. He could easily make more than he needed and leave a note. Even if Shepard really was as incompetent a cook as she'd joked, she'd be able to operate the reheater. He stopped wrapping the vat-beef and started to slice more. Vat-grown meat had a strange texture if you tried to cook it like a steak, but it wasn't noticeable when it was sliced thinly.

"For Shepard?" Chakwas leaned back against the counter and swirled the tea bag around in her
mug. "Why bother? She's the least picky eater I've ever met."

He remembered how excited the commander had been when he cooked for her. "But very appreciative."

Chakwas was smiling at him warmly, a hint of humor in her eyes. "A little bribery for the commander, Jeff?"

He blinked. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The doctor's smile grew broader. "Well, you know what they say. The way to a woman's heart is through her stomach…"

From the darkened mess, a sleepy voice added, "…and up through the diaphragm." There was a yawn, and then, "Between the fourth and fifth ribs works too."

The commander had pulled her head from the table and was knuckling at her eyes.

*Oh god, that's cute. Shit, 'cute' is not a word that should be used for Shepard. Or anyone who comes out of a sound sleep discussing stabbing techniques.*

Chakwas looked flustered. "Drat, Jeff, you were supposed to be quiet!"

"Who started talking, Doc? Wasn't me."

They both pretended not to hear the quiet moan as Shepard unfolded herself from the table and came to join them.

Joker was about to ask her how much she'd heard, but he realized how incriminating that sounded just in time and kept his mouth shut. He settled for "I'm sorry we woke you up."

She yawned again. "Wasn't you. Was the good doctor here. What's up with that, doc? I thought med clinics were supposed to be places of rest and healing."

"Who the shit told you that?" Joker laughed bitterly. "Hospitals are the last place you should go if you want to sleep. They wake you up at all hours to make sure all your bits still wiggle."

Shepard raised her eyebrows. "*All* your bits?"

"Shepard!" Chakwas said, exasperated.

Shepard gave her a look of injured innocence. "What?"

The doctor just shook her head. "You two stay out of trouble. Commander, I'll let you know when Vanessa wakes up." She took her tea and went back to the med lab.

The commander leaned over his shoulder.

"Whatcha makin?"

"Just soup." He opened a cube of bullion to add to the browning meat and onions and splashed in water. They were out of fresh vegetables; freeze-dried and frozen would have to do.

"Is there enough for me?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're insatiable."
He hadn't realized quite how close she was. When she murmured, "Oh, you've no idea," he could feel her breath on his neck.

For the second time in one day, focusing on what he was doing was suddenly very difficult. And he'd only have to turn to kiss her, to feel her lips on his... he realized he'd frozen and quickly stirred the soup so it wouldn't burn. Anyway, if he turned from the counter in the least his distraction would be a bit too obvious.

Shepard stepped backward and leaned against the other counter. Joker's mental faculties returned with the distance. It's not fair. He suspected she just teased him because she liked to see him off-balance. Maybe he could turn that game back on her.

"Oh yeah, there's enough for you." He drawled, and winked.

"Soup?" she asked slyly.

*That depends. How much is 'enough' of easily-broken, extremely guilty pilot?*

"Always about the food." He sighed. "Gardner must be your favorite person on the crew."

"Gardner doesn't cook as well as you. If my standards were that low my favorite person would be the guy that delivers the crates of ration bars."

"That's usually a mech."

"Okay, the mech that delivers ration bars."

He snorted. "I bet you send it letters. Grab two mugs, would you?"

She laughed. "I would, but I don't know how to write 'xoxo' in binary."

He filled the cups she passed him and handed her one. Now that it was safe, he leaned back against the counter to eat. Standing felt good after all the time in the helmsman's chair, and if he sat down he wasn't sure he'd be able to get up again.

The commander leaned against the opposite counter and blew across the mug to cool it, closing her eyes as the smell drifted up to her. They ate in silence for a few moments.

Finally Shepard broke the silence. "I owe you big, Joker."

He looked up, startled. "It's just soup."

She chuckled. "Well, thanks for that too, but it wasn't what I meant. I've been going through mission vid – you saved our asses back there. I hadn't realized the hotshot flying was just icing on the cake."

He shrugged. "You'd have come up with something."

"I was trying to come up with a way to cut losses," she said seriously. "You made it a win."

"You're just happy you got to escape dramatically right before the explosion. I know you love that."

"Hey, it beats being in the explosion." She sipped her soup. "I don't get how you can be so smug about your flying and so humble about this. C'mon. You went above-and-beyond. What do you want?"
A kiss. *That's a suitable reward for heroics, right?* But he didn't want one from the damsel in distress; he wanted one from the warrior across from him.

He stared into his mug. No. It'd be stupid to risk this. Shepard would go back to cool professionalism, and he'd always wonder if she talked about putting him in his place in the same cavalier manner she'd mentioned turning down Alenko. Kaidan had mistaken the commander's friendship for flirtation, too. He remembered what Kaidan had said when they were drinking. *Don't get thinking along those lines. You wouldn't have a chance.* As if he needed someone else to tell him that, ha.

Kaidan had had half the female crew of the SR1 mooning after him, and at least two of the guys. *And he'd never killed Shepard.*

He raised his eyes to see Shepard regarding him patiently. Over her shoulder the doctor was approaching. He nodded his head in Chakwas' direction.

"Looks like sleeping beauty might be waking up."

Shepard turned to acknowledge Chakwas.

"Commander, she's starting to stir. You should be there – heaven knows everything else here will be strange. I'll give you some privacy."

Shepard nodded, and raised her soup mug to Joker. "Thanks." Her eyes held a question.

He shoved his fantasy aside and answered it. "How about some *real* coffee in the morning, commander? Did I do enough to get access to the secret stash?"

"Can do, Joker." She grinned and turned away.

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Rhi sat by Nessie's bed, her half-eaten cup of soup in one hand, wondering what you said to someone you hadn't seen in fifteen years. Ness had been a child when she'd seen her last; she must be in her early twenties now. Shepard had met her and her brother when their foster-care situation grew so abusive that ten-year-old Jake took his little sister and ran away from home, two scared, starving kids on the streets of Vancouver. They'd been lucky to run into Rhi and the Reds before someone else ran into them.

Nessie's eyes blinked open and she glanced around the room in evident confusion before her gaze settled on Rhi.

"You *are* here."

Shepard shrugged. "It's my ship."

Ness said, "And you came for me," as if she didn't quite believe it.

"Of course." Rhi smiled in the dimness. "Not that I'm recommending you make a habit of getting kidnapped or anything."

Ness grimaced. "Oh, hell no. That was… it was a nightmare." Her brow creased. "And it still feels like a dream. You're here."

"You keep saying that."
The girl pulled herself up to a sitting position and seemed to notice she wasn't wearing her own clothes for the first time. She picked at the material of the too-large t-shirt. "Well, you disappeared." She scowled. "Why didn't you ever try to contact me? I wondered for years! If Jake wasn't there I'd have thought I imagined that whole time."

Rhi sat back, startled. "I tried, Ness. But you were in the hospital, and then you were adopted, and I didn't even know your last name. And no one thought you or your brother should be 'exposed to a bad influence from your past.'" She shrugged and offered a half-hearted smile. "I suppose they thought you'd run away again and start a teddy-bear smuggling ring or something." The kids had been so young.

"But..." Ness was clearly upset. "It was like... it was so disconnected, like there was this part of my life that everyone thought I'd just forget 'cause I was little. Even Jake wanted to pretend! So I stopped asking about you and pretend to be n-n-normal, and go to school and college and and and then I'm fucking kidnapped and strapped to a goddamn bomb." Ness burst into tears.

Shepard set her soup down so fast a bit sloshed over the side and sat on the edge of the cot, wrapping an arm around Nessie's shoulders. The girl laid her head on her shoulder and kept crying.


She didn't know how to deal with this. She'd given words of comfort to marines who saw their buddies killed; she'd presented a folded Alliance flag to the grieving parents of a man who'd died under her command. She'd picked up and bandaged this same girl when she was a child. But she'd never had someone cry on her, never dealt with the civilians who had their lives torn apart. She was always gone by then.

Clean-up was someone else's job.

She'd been gone for Ness's clean-up, too. From her point of view I got her safely to a hospital and abandoned her. What could she say? She'd been a frightened teen shoved into a new world. Once she knew Jake and Ness would have a home, they'd quickly dropped off her list of priorities.

"I'm sorry, Ness," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't know how to find you. And I was a teen, and I was selfish. They took me away, and I wasn't free to go looking. And when my face got splashed all over the news after Elysium, I assumed anyone who wanted to find me would." She shut her eyes in the dimness. "I didn't know Trex would use you to get to me. I didn't know he wanted to get to me. If I had known..." I should have known. Should have realized someone would get pissed when I shot that weasel Finch. "They won't get you again. You're safe." Part of her long talk with Anderson had been arranging security for Ness and her brother, just in case. "We'll get you home." She had no idea where the girl's home was. "Shh. It's okay."

Eventually Ness quieted. "S-sorry. I didn't m-mean to get mad at you."

"It's alright. You've been through a lot." Rhi offered her the cooling mug of soup.

"What time is it?" Ness's voice was stuffy with the after effects of her tears. "I feel like I could go right back to sleep."

"Oh-one-hundred." Shepard corrected herself, "One a.m., ship's time." She yawned. "C'mon, we'll get you in a real bed. The doctor isn't fond of people who don't need her cluttering up her med bay." Ness could bunk down in her quarters. Rhi didn't mind. She'd slept in more uncomfortable places than the couch.
For the first decades after the introduction of vat-grown meat, truth-in-advertising standards required it to be labeled 'beaf' or 'beeph.' By the time of our story, however, it has become so common-place that this standard is largely forgotten.

Some people still like the old, slightly-odd tasting formulations better, of course. There's no accounting for taste or nostalgia. Some people still eat spam (and some people juggle geese).
A wave of chatter accompanied the steam when Joker stepped into the men's showers, and he silently cursed all morning people everywhere. He undressed and made a bee-line for an unused shower, hung his hat on the towel hook, and cranked the water as hot as it would go.

"Hey, Moreau, what do you know about the commander's friend?"

He pulled his head out from under the water. "That the commander will have your hide for a rug if you badger her with questions." He remembered something he'd heard listening to the shuttle feed. "Oh, and she likes donuts." Which Shepard used to steal for her. Commander Shepard, hero of Elysium, Savior of the Citadel, and Donut Thief. He stuck his head back under the water.


"You think the commander wears garters?" Matthews whistled. "That'd be hot."

Hawthorne agreed. "Mmm, picture it."

Joker closed his eyes and tried to ignore them. They were just playing around; there was no reason it should irritate him. Chalk it up to the lack of coffee.

"Shepard?" Hadley had clearly never considered her in those terms. "I don't think the commander wears anything but uniforms and armor. Why think about her when Lawson is strutting around the ship?"

Joker could think of a whole list of reasons, but he was glad to hear the conversation turning away from Shepard.

Matthews punched Hadley in the arm and reclaimed the soap. "You fantasize about Miranda? That woman eats her mates."

"And she doesn't wear garters." Donnelly's voice was muffled by his shirt. "You'd see the line through that skin-tight suit of hers. Me-ow."

"Hey, everyone has off-hours! If that's her uniform, what'd you think her clubbing outfit looks like, huh?"

"A parka," Joker answered. He found he didn't mind the comments half so much when they were directed at Lawson, and the hot water sluicing over his sore shoulders was reminding him that mornings weren't entirely evil.

"I don't get the impression she spends a lotta time lolly-gaggin, man. Woman's a regular work-a-holic."

"Worse than Gabby?" Matthews quipped back, but Donnelly was already out of the door.

As nice as the hot water was, coffee sounded even better. Joker quickly finished his shower and dressed, toweling his hair dry before he retrieved his cap from the hook.

The tables in the mess were almost full, but Shepard caught his eye, gestured to the seat beside her, and pushed a mug of coffee toward him. He could smell that it wasn't Gardner's normal brew before his butt hit the chair. She didn't forget my reward.
He took a long sip and managed, "Morning." He glanced at the still-steaming mug. "It's still warm."

"You're very reliable." The corner of her mouth crooked up. "EDI was able to estimate your arrival within four minutes. She may need more things to occupy her subroutines."

Oh. EDI. Of course. *Don't be an idiot.* "Creepy computer stalker," he grumbled. "It's just watching now, but you wait."

Shepard just shook her head, intent on something pretending to be bacon.

Gardner glanced over to see how many mouths still needed feeding. "One more?"

The commander raised two fingers, her mouth still full, and nodded towards the hall. Ness had just appeared in the doorway. Despite her fading bruises and clearly borrowed clothing she looked much better than she had when Shepard first carried her onto the *Normandy.*

Gardner nodded and slid two full trays down the table.

Shepard handed Ness another mug of coffee and made informal introductions. "Kelly Chambers on your left, Nisha Patel – wave, Patel! – down there, engineers Gabby and Ken, and helmsman Jeff Moreau."

Donnelly smiled. "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

Shepard blinked. Out of the side of her mouth she asked "Was Donnelly just polite?"

"Gabby's pinching him under the table," Joker whispered.

Judging by the way she hunkered over her coffee cup, low enough her blue hair brushed the table, the commander's friend wasn't much more of a morning person than he was. She did a much better job of responding cheerfully to the introductions than he would have, though.

Breakfast finished, Shepard detailed Kelly to look after Ness while she worked, then joined Joker heading for the CIC.

"Throwing the lamb among the wolves, commander?" he asked. "I hear Kelly's been making the rounds of the crew. Surprised she hasn't seduced you yet."

The commander snorted. "She already tried."

*Oh, to be a fly on the wall...* he didn't find the prospect titillating by any means, but he suspected it had been funny as hell. "Oh, damn, see, now I'm feeling left out."

"Don't worry so much." The elevator door opened on the CIC, where his relief pilot was waiting to go off duty. "She's probably just starting at the end of the alphabet and working up." Shepard grinned. "It's good, this way you'll be able to warn Mercer."

Mercer squeaked "Warn Mercer about what?" and Shepard chuckled as she headed towards the briefing room.

Shepard had spent the prior evening going through mission vid footage, so she used the debriefing not to gather objective intel, but to gauge her squad.
They'd worked well as a team without her direct leadership, and with the exception of Miranda and Jack, they kept it up in the meeting. It was promising. She still thought the Illusive man was a pompous fool – picking the very top ranked individuals in a given area regardless of their personalities or track records was not actually the best way to make a team – but they were making progress.

After she had EDI extrapolate the vid into 3D and rendered it on the central projector, the meeting evolved into a more free-form discussion of tactics. For the most part Shepard was happy to sit back and let them work things out for themselves, stepping in only when critique got a bit too personal or Jack looked likely to come unhinged.

Garrus in particular had a lot of ideas. It was good to see him putting his leadership experience as Archangel to use. She suspected he was trying to make up for collecting dust in nowheresville while a bloody big fight was going on. She'd already commended him and Samara on patience. Complimenting Samara on patience was like complimenting water on being wet.

The meeting stretched later than she'd thought, and her stomach was growling for lunch by the time she dismissed the squad and asked EDI to send Chambers and Ness to the briefing room. She took a ration bar out of her pocket and ate perched on the table.

Miranda paused on her way out. "If I may ask, Commander, what are you going to talk to the girl about?"

Shepard gestured with her half-eaten ration bar. "Cerberus. Collectors. Reapers. Impending death of the universe." I may disappear again, but this time Ness will know why.

"Are you sure that's wise? Letting just anyone know about our mission…"

Shepard raised one eyebrow. "I'm sorry, Miranda, is there a part of this that's supposed to be secret? Because I'm missing something. Maybe it's because it seems that convincing as many people as possible of the Reapers is our only hope. Maybe it's because your boss seemed to think bringing me back as some kind of symbol was a good plan, and symbols don't really work unless people know they're there. Or maybe I'm getting mixed signals from the giant fucking logos plastered all over my ship."

Miranda gaped at her.

"Have you considered that maybe, just maybe, the secrecy fetish is just a kneejerk reaction for you?" Shepard bit off another bite and swallowed it. "Of course, if it's actually a fetish fetish, I don't want to know."

She grinned at Miranda's scowl and went forward to talk to Joker while she waited for Ness.

Joker hit the galley just as most of the dinner crowd was leaving, and found Shepard, Ness, and Tali just sitting down. He grabbed a tray and sat across from Shepard.

"Tali! I'm surprised to see you pretending to eat with the levo-set. Isn't our wonderful and varied diet going to make you mad with envy?" He took a cautious sniff. Thank goodness they were docking at Illium tomorrow. Gardner's stocks were declining, and so was the quality of the grub.

The quarian cocked her head to the side, peering at his plate. "Somehow that plate of glue fails to make me jealous."
"Can't think why," he muttered. He caught Ness's eye and shrugged. "Sorry about this. Being a hostage must have been rough, but this is adding insult to injury. Maybe the commander will have Gardner beaten."

"Hey!" came the affronted yell from the galley, "I heard that!"

"Well, it's always worth a try."

Ness ventured a smile. "I don't remember you complaining that much at breakfast."

"There was breakfast? I must have blocked it out."

The corner of Shepard's mouth twitched upwards. "Joker, I knew you weren't really verbal before coffee, but I didn't realize you weren't cognizant."

"Self-preservation." He made sure his voice carried to the galley. "I prefer to think that Gardner's breakfasts are all just a bad dream."

Donnelly had been lingering over his dinner at the other end of the table, and he looked up at that. "Ach, I've had more pleasant nightmares."

"Don't say one word about haggis, Donnelly, or you're on ration bars for a week!" The cook waved threateningly with his ladle.

Shepard popped a tater-tot into her mouth. "You're all pampered. Just eat your damn dinner."

Ness chewed thoughtfully on something that may have been meat under the gray sauce, wrinkling her nose as she swallowed. "It's not as bad as burnt rat."

Shepard laughed. "God damn. You burn a rat once and you never live it down."

Joker looked between the two of them, then caught Tali's eye. He'd gotten better at reading quarian body-language since first shipping with her, and he suspected that under her mask she had the same bemused expression he did. Tough-as-nails commander Shepard had a genuine civilian old friend. Wonders never ceased.

"Y'know, I didn't really believe you when you said you couldn't cook."

"Would I lie to you?" Shepard couldn't do a sweet-innocent expression for shit.

He thought about that for a bit. If she thought it was for some greater strategic good, yeah, probably. Maybe even if it'd be really funny.

She poked his arm with her fork. "You're supposed to say 'No, of course not, I trust you implicitly,' not go disturbingly quiet."

He startled. "Oh, I do. I'm just not sure I trust you on the 'not lying' bit. Gunfights, strategic decisions, letting me know I have gravy on my beard, you have my complete and total trust. Believing things from your past? Not so much."

"You have gravy on your beard."

His hand twitched towards his face before his brain caught up, and Shepard burst out laughing.

Ness looked back and forth between them, eyes gleaming. "We didn't eat that badly. Remember my birthday cake? That's still the most… memorable birthday I've ever had."
"Ness, I didn't cook the cake. Your brother and I stole it out of a dumpster behind the bakery. They put the wrong name on it or something and tossed it out box and all."

Tali gasped. Joker rapidly re-calibrated his mental picture of young Shepard to include dumpster-diving for baked goods.

"Oh," Ness looked as if she'd just figured out one of life's great mysteries. "That'd explain why my name was written in ketchup."

Rhi was still grinning. "It was free in little packets at the burger place."

"I'm just glad you didn't use mustard."

"It wouldn't have contrasted enough with the frosting! Give us some credit for class. Your brother wanted to use relish, since you liked green, but I thought the chunks would spoil the effect."

"Speaking of chunks, I'm about to blow some," Joker said. "You make Gardner's food sound like haute cuisine."

"Told you! You should appreciate your damn tater-tots!" Shepard gestured with the offending bit of reconstituted potato. When he opened his mouth to protest, she launched it neatly at the offered target. The tater-tot bounced off his tonsils.

Joker put his hand to his mouth and tried to overcome the gag reflex. Ness and Tali dissolved into disbelieving laughter. When he'd recovered himself (and eaten the tater-tot), Shepard smirked at him.

"Command —"

"—hath it's privileges, yeah, yeah." He tried to scowl at her, but he couldn't do it.

Shepard found it was odd to be heading to her quarters with company. She'd thoroughly enjoyed the lighthearted reminiscing over dinner, and listening to Ness chatting with Mordin about her graduate work in xenosociolinguistics. Now, though, she wasn't sure what to say.

She groped for something to fill the silence and settled on asking how her day had been.

"It was interesting. I've never been on a military ship. It was really cool! And Kelly's nice. She, uh, tried to hit on me."

Shepard bit back the desire to explain the differences between real military and a civilian vessel with state-of-the-art technology and big guns. Ness wouldn't care. Yeoman Chambers' behavior, however… she rubbed her hand over her eyes. "Oh. Yeah, she does that. She's not usually pushy, though. Did she bother you?"

"Oh, no, not at all." She looked uncomfortable. "I told her I just had a bad break-up and wasn't ready to get into anything else for awhile. She was really sympathetic."

The elevator door slid open, and Rhi gestured Ness out ahead of her and into the cabin. "She'd love that line. Kelly's big on mental health." In point of fact, that had been why she'd tagged the yeoman to play tour guide.

Someone had sent a bottle of wine up to her quarters. That was thoughtful. She wondered who'd
Rhi poured while Ness flopped on the couch.

"It was true! I was actually on vacation, trying to get my head cleared out, when Trex and his people grabbed me. It was kind of a shock." She laughed. "Er, obviously getting kidnapped was a shock. I meant my girlfriend," she shook her head, "ex-girlfriend wanting to split. We'd been together quite awhile."

Ah. Consoling broken hearts over a bottle of alcohol was something she'd had experience with. Granted, wine wasn't usually considered up to the task. She thought longingly of the doctor's reserve brandy, perhaps followed by whiskey – could you get it by the pint? – but shoved the idea firmly aside. It sounded good. It sounded too good.

She made a conscious effort to sip the wine slowly, swirling it around in her mouth before she swallowed. If she drank only after Ness did, she could pace herself.

"D'you want to talk about it?" Or is she was still at the stage where she wants to call the ex 'that bitch' and break things?

Ness shrugged. "I don't know. It all seems kind of petty after being strapped to a bomb and then finding out the whole universe is under attack."

"Not really." Shepard looked at her seriously. "You can't think about the big shit all the time, Ness. And how we relate to each other isn't petty, anyway. If it wasn't important, we might as well give up on all the big shit."

"This afternoon you told me about a race of robot bogey-men from deep-space bent on destroying life like a villain from a bad vid, and you're planning on going to the center of the galaxy to kill their ancient bug-servants. And that's just 'big shit'?"

Rhi rolled another sip of wine around her mouth while she thought. In a career that had pretty much started with fighting off an entire batarian invasion force and progressed until she was gunning down the possessed puppet of a sentient machine, it was quite possible she'd lost sight of a more normal perspective.

"Really big shit?" she finally volunteered, helpfully.

Ness laughed, a real, releasing belly laugh strong enough that she had to set her wine down. "You're insane."

Shepard muttered, "and they called me mad," into her wineglass, and added a small 'bwahahaha."

She waited until Ness controlled her laughter to continue. "I know it's almost a cliché, but paying attention to day-to-day problems is actually how we manage to stay sane in the middle of all this. You heard the conversation at breakfast – no one talks about the collectors."

"They talk about plans for shore leave, or how Kasumi's mooning after Taylor, about Robson's little kid or whatever asari vid star last caught Matthews' eye."

Ness curled her feet up under her. "So it's only human?"

"Except the aliens all do it too, yeah."

Ness leaned forward and retrieved her wine glass. Rhi topped it off. "So in that case, oh wise dispenser of advice, my girlfriend of three years dumped me and I can't really explain why. I'm not sure whether I love her and miss her or would like the chance to have dumped her sorry ass first."
What would you advise?"

Shepard stared at her levelly. Ness sounded a bit tipsy already, and she hadn't even emptied her first glass.

"I'd probably go on vacation."

"I was *kidnapped* on vacation!"

Shepard shrugged. "Hey, the last time I tried getting clear of someone that way the entire planet was overrun by batarions. You got off easy." Granted, she hadn't been pining – just putting as much distance between herself and a very foolish one-night stand as possible – but the theory was similar.

"And here I thought you'd have something really insightful to tell me."

"About relationships?" Rhi snorted. "I'm not the person to ask, Ness."

"Why?" Ness leaned forward. Her eyes were sparkling with wine. Rhi gave in and poured herself another glass. *Making me the galaxy's most expensive date was an upgrade?* *Fuck Cerberus.*

"Work, I suppose." She shrugged. "And civilians get weird when they know you're going to go 'risk your life' again in a week or a two." *And the guys you take to bed on a battle-adrenaline high turn out to be jerks in the morning. Especially when you get promoted over them a week later…*

Ness grinned at her teasingly and asked, "What about the pilot?"

If Rhi hadn't just swallowed, she would have sprayed wine across the table. She choked out, "What about the pilot?"

"You seemed awfully chatty with him compared to anyone else."

Shepard shrugged and refilled their glasses. "I've known him a lot longer than most of the crew." She winked at Ness. "Through some 'big shit', even."

"You smiled when you introduced him at breakfast. You didn't for anyone else."

"I didn't." She looked at Ness's expression. "I did?"

"…and you were talking with him when Kelly brought me to find you."

"Keeping track of where my ship's going is part of my job." Shepard sought refuge in another swallow of wine.

Ness's smile only grew broader. "Oh, c'mon, Rhi. You *normally* chuck tater-tots in your crews' mouths?" She giggled. "It's a bit, y'know, elementary school as flirting goes, but –"

"It was a good target! And I wanted to see his reaction."

"Uh huh. 'Just trying to get a reaction' really *is* elementary-school flirting."

Rhi thought of the vid saved on her personal computer. The clip of the song-prank from the cockpit security feed probably came up under 'most recently viewed files.' She enjoyed watching Joker blush, even if she was afraid it was just embarrassment at being surprised in front of his crewmates. *No one ever pays attention to the lyrics.*

"Rhi-i," Ness's sing-song called her back into the present.
"Sorry, what?"

Ness tried to contain her smile, but her eyes were sparkling. "You do like him!"

Rhi rubbed her arm while she tried to decide how much to admit, and realized she was touching the tattoo she’d got on the Citadel. *Anything you do to your body to make it yours again.* She remembered every word he’d said to her, the advice clearly torn from a place just as vulnerable as she had felt.

Even if she’d wanted to share that, it wasn’t hers to share. But the rest – the teasing before she went out on missions and the cracks when she got back, the familiar voice on the radio that could make her heart lift in the middle of hell – she’d treasured that since they were on the SR1. Since before she’d died. She’d just never intended to do anything about it, then. There was nothing wrong with having a subordinate who could make you smile whether you wanted to or not.

Ness was still waiting for an answer. *What the hell, she'll be off the ship tomorrow.*

"Yeah." She grinned sheepishly. "I do."

"Ha! Knew it!"

Shepard stared at her wine glass, surprised at her own embarrassment.

Ness leaned forward to peer at her in the dim light. "You are not blushing."

She raised her brow, archly. "You're right, I'm not." Somehow that tipped her over the edge. She felt her cheeks grow hotter. Her skin wasn't dark enough to hide that.

"You totally are," Ness collapsed in a fit of giggles.

"If it wasn't too late I'd send you to bed without dinner," she grumbled.

"Why don't you just say something?"

She put a hand over her eyes. "No, I can't."

"Sure you could!"

"No." She really shouldn't have admitted it. It was easier to keep a cool demeanor if you never let anyone see your human foibles.

Ness stared at her for a moment, then said incredulously, "No way. Are you a –" She paused as if she was embarrassed to say the last word.

It took Rhi a moment to understand what she was implying, then she laughed aloud. "Ha, no. I got that first-time crap out of the way while you were still a kid, Ness." She grinned, embarrassment gone. "Back seat of a car, in good old North American tradition."

"Oh, okay." Ness twisted her mouth into a comical grimace. "Wait, not –"

Rhi chuckled. "No, not that car."

Usually she'd been able to find someplace decent to crash with the kids she'd taken under her wing, but she never knew when an abandoned building where they'd been squatting would be knocked down, or the tweakers in some shared dive would get just a bit too scary. Her fallback place was an old junked car, its front end smashed into a fence so thoroughly that it was more bother to take
away than the metal was worth. Ness had spent more than one night in the back of that car, curled up in a nest of blankets in the rear cargo area.

"So…?" Ness was sprawled on her part of the couch, chin propped up on her hand.

"So what?"

"Details!"

*She has got to be kidding. This is ridiculous.* She thought for a long moment, trying to remember.

"Mitsuoka four-door aircar. Blue."

Ness stared at her. "I *meant* the guy."

Shepard grinned happily. She'd known exactly what she meant.

"Oh, come on. You remember his name, at least?"

Shepard shrugged. "What's it matter? Not someone you knew. Not in the gang, if that's what you're asking. Met at a concert, and he had a car and a real home to go to. We kinda went out for awhile, but I spent a lot of time dodging questions about where I went to school and where I lived and shit. Didn't think 'nowhere' and 'nowhere' were good answers." She chuckled. "I was really impressed by the whole 'owned a functional car' thing, though."

"That's not an impressive first love story."

"Why the hell would it be? I was fifteen."

Unfortunately, Ness wasn't easily distracted. "So what's your hang-up, then? The worst you get is a 'no', right? You can't be afraid of being a bit embarrassed."

"No. That's not at all the worst that can happen." Shepard closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Ness, I've been in one command position or another for years – got upjumped real fast after the skyllian blitz. Most of the people I know best are people I give orders to or take them from. There are rules upon rules about –"

"But you're not in the military any more, right?"

Shepard shrugged. "No matter what Taylor or Donnelly say about red tape, most of those rules are there for a reason, which means you should at least *think* before you break 'em." She drummed her fingers on her thigh, looking for the right words to explain something that had been a given her entire adult life. She tried not to think of Joker. Easier to keep it abstract. "Some of the reasons don't really apply, or I *don't* care about, but the big one… it can be very hard for someone to tell their superior 'no'. I don't want to put *any* of my crew into a position where they feel they need to lie."

She sighed. "Having someone say 'yes' and not mean it would be far worse than hearing 'no."

Ness just looked at her thoughtfully. Rhi shook her head to clear it and downed the last of her wine. "So much for serious relationship discussions. Wanna watch 'Blasto'?"
Chapter 19

Rhi tugged the hem of the grey Cerberus tunic. When Liara had agreed to arrange for getting Ness safely home it was on the condition that the three of them have lunch together “like civilized people”, and the tunic was the least conspicuous item in her very limited wardrobe. It was only after they reached the trading floor of Nos Astra that she realized it was the first time since her revival that she’d left the safety of the Normandy without armor.

Ness had already said her goodbyes to the crew. She’d even hugged Miranda when the operative came out of her normal isolation to say farewell. That surprised everyone, but no one so much as Lawson herself.

Liara looked elegant, as usual. Her reputation (and presumably her credits) saw them quickly seated in one of Nos Astra's nicer restaurants, a place with soft lighting and a view.

Shepard didn't want to foist Ness off on Liara, but interrupting their mission to play taxi service would be ridiculous, even without taking into account the Council's edict that she and the Normandy confine their operations to the terminus systems. Shepard tried not to think about what it meant that she was more comfortable entrusting her friend to Liara than to the Alliance on the Citadel. She hated to think that the Cerberus distrust was rubbing off on her, and hated the thought that the Alliance distrusted her even more. Luckily Ness was thrilled by the chance to spend a few days on Illium.

For her part Liara took the disruption of her schedule with good grace. She smiled conspiratorially at Ness and flicked her eyes toward Shepard. “I'm sure we'll have a lot to talk about.”

Nessie grinned. “Oh, I'm sure we will.”

"Fuuuck," Shepard drawled, earning a laugh from Ness and rolled eyes from Liara.

Rhi pretended to glare, then speared a fuschia curl of meat on her fork. "Shut up and eat your squid-thing."

Liara looked exasperated, though Shepard suspected it was as much an act as her glare. "I don't know why I was ever infatuated with you."

Rhi grinned. "That makes two of us."

Liara actually chuckled at that.

Shepard was glad she'd mended her relationship with the asari. Ness and Liara seemed to actually enjoy each others' company. Their scholarly interests overlapped enough to allow for lively conversation, and Rhi was happy to listen and eat. When the time came for goodbyes, she no longer felt like she was abandoning her childhood friend.

"Liara, I owe you one." She looked at her levelly. "When you're ready to take him out, let me know." They both knew she meant the Shadow Broker.

"I'll try, Shepard, but if I get a lead I may have to act --"

"Oh? If you find a ship that can get you where you need to go faster than Joker and the Normandy, I'll be very impressed." She knew she sounded a bit smug, but she didn't care.
Liara grumbled. "I never liked him."

"But you have to admit he's the best." She avoided Ness's eyes.

“Yes, but don't tell him I said it.”

They both laughed, and Shepard hugged her good-bye.

Ness suddenly looked serious. “If... if you make it back, will –"

Shepard looked her firmly in the eye. "When we make it back from the omega-4, I'll get in touch." She hugged Ness tightly. *I won't abandon you again, kid.*

Back on the Normandy, the veneer of civilization had given way to efficient preparation. Protecting Lawson's sister turned into a far bloodier task than anyone had expected. By the time they'd seen the girl safely to her transport the normally icy Miranda had been through the emotional wringer, and Shepard was ready for dinner, one of Kasumi's novels, and a long, boring flight.

Of course, that was too much to ask for.

“Take pictures.” Joker’s flippant request echoed in her ears as she ran into Lawson’s office, dodging an airborne chair. *What I'd give to work with real professionals again.* For all the negative press the alliance seemed to have gotten lately, her crew had known their jobs inside and out – and known what to keep out of their jobs.

Frustration made her less sympathetic with the ex-con than she would have been otherwise. *Just when Miranda's finally showing a hint of humanity, Jack comes along to make sure she stays in the role of Head Cerberus Bitch. Fan-fucking-tastic. They've avoided each other for weeks. Why the hell does she have to pick a fight now?*

The personnel meltdown had interrupted her on her way to check in with Joker. She’d barely had time for a shower and hadn’t had anything to eat. The raging hunger she always felt after extensive use of biotics had shown up right on time, so she gnawed on one of the emergency ration bars she kept in her shipsuit pocket as the elevator took her to the CIC.

She stuffed the half-finished bar back in her pocket as the elevator doors opened and jogged toward the cockpit, nodding at Kelly on the way.

Joker's chair swung around at the sound of her feet, and he cocked his head to the side.

“Get us off Illium and head for the relay.” He radioed traffic control for a slot in the departure cue.

Shepard slumped against the bulkhead and pulled the half-eaten bar out of her pocket. “This crew's a mess, Joker,” she said quietly. “They're getting better, but we've still got a ship of unstable geniuses who can't work with other people.”

“Hey, commander, I'm right here!”

She tossed the ration-bar wrapper at him. “*Not you.* You're the token stable one.” She sighed. “If Miranda would just admit that Cerberus has done some truly vile shit, and Jack would realize that Miranda didn't personally do the real vile shit –”
“As far as we know.”

“Thanks, you're a big help.” It was too accurate to be funny, but her mouth twitched in an involuntary smile anyway. “Okay, if Jack would realize that Miranda didn't have anything to do with her particular real vile shit – don't argue, she would have had to be a really precocious villain to be involved in Jack's childhood – it'd all be sunshine and,” she'd been going to say 'roses', but she remembered Joker's comment on nostalgia and finished, “bunnies.”

“Yeah, and volus will sing opera.”

“Don't tempt fate. I never thought anyone would put on an elcor Hamlet.”

The docking clamps hissed and Joker eased the Normandy out of her berth. Shepard watched in silence as he smoothly fed the ship more power and slipped them between the tall towers of Nos Astra. His hands moved fluidly over the controls, guiding the massive frigate as if it was an extension of his body. She loved watching him fly.

When they were clear of Illium's cluttered orbit, Joker broke the silence. “So, back to the important things.” He must have seen her confusion. “Pictures.”

Her shoulders slumped. “No pictures, Joker,” she said firmly. “And I wouldn't try to get any, if I were you. I don't think either Jack or Miranda would appreciate you ogling their cat-fight.”

“Ogling? Me?”

She didn't buy his affronted act for a minute. “Everyone’s always trying not to stare at Miranda or Jack.” She made a sad face. It's enough to make a woman feel left out. “I suppose it’s hard not to stare at Jack, with all the ink. And Miranda has the spray-on-suit. Think ship efficiency would go up if I ordered her not to wear heels?”

“Probably. You'd make Donnelly awfully sad, though.”

“No you?” She asked casually, as if she didn't care about the answer.

“No.” He snorted. “Though the clicking sound is nice. Gives me warning that she's prowling around up here.”

Joker's clear disdain for Miranda brightened Rhi's day considerably. Cool it, girl. Just because he's not interested in her doesn't mean he's interested in you. “Maybe she'd wear a bell.”

“Ha! Can I have pictures of that conversation?”

“No dice. Secret of leadership: try not to give orders you know won't be followed.”

“Uh oh, commander. Telling me your secrets?”

She winked. “Want to hear more?”

He looked up at her slyly. “Are they juicy?”

Damn, there should be a law against a man having eyes like that. It's entirely unfair. She was struggling for something to say that would make her helmsman keep giving her that look when yeoman Chambers voice came over the PA.

“Commander, you've received a new message. I think you might want to look at this one now – it's from Alliance command.”
Joker waited until the commander was halfway down the corridor to the CIC before he looked over his shoulder to check out the view.

*Does she know she could give Miranda a run for her money in the derriere department?*

Shepard didn’t have any of the saucy saunter Miranda had in her walk. Instead she had a fighter's smooth economy of motion, every movement purposeful. When she was relaxing in the mess, she could go so still the crew seemed to forget she was there – though Joker was always aware when she was in the room.

Miranda knew she had an amazing body and refused to let anyone forget it. It was another way to manipulate people, a weapon in her arsenal. She used her appeal in a way Joker found totally unappealing. Jack flaunted her skin as a challenge. *Like she needs an excuse to go berserk and rip someone's face off.*

Shepard, on the other hand, moved like she wasn't aware of anyone's gaze at all. She was just… Shepard.

*And she has an amazing ass.*

“Are you experiencing some difficulty, Mr. Moreau? You appear to be operating at suboptimal capacity.”

“What?” Damn that AI. “No, of course not.” He sternly pulled his attention back to his task. *If being on a small ship and being your commanding officer aren’t enough to warn you it'll never happen, what about the fact that you killed her, you jack ass?*

“Are you certain you are well, Mr. Moreau?”

“Yes, already! What's gotten up your holographic butt?”

“The commander sent a course-change two point three minutes ago. You have not yet acknowledged.”

*Shit!* He finally noticed the blinking signal and ran his eyes over the destination data. So Shepard wanted to head for the Omega nebula instead of the Citadel. No harm done. They were still an hour out from the relay, anyway. He glanced at the coordinates again to get the specifics. They looked familiar. Why?

The numbered coordinates slowly translated themselves into words.

*Amada system.*

*Alchera.*

They were heading to the place where he'd lost the Normandy SR1. The place where Shepard had died.

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The giant planet spun in the forward view-port, blue-white with ice. They watched it in silence, each deep in their own thoughts. The trip to the Amada system had been uneventful, unfortunately. Joker had almost wished for an emergency: an urgent distress beacon, pirates, anything that
demanded action. Instead there was nothing on the trip but time to think.

Shepard had taken the time to explain to him that they were placing a memorial on behalf of the Alliance for the crew that had died with the Normandy, and that she was to look for dog-tags or any other sign of the crew themselves. It was the only time she'd spoken to him since she'd got the message from Hackett. He missed her company almost as much as he dreaded the reasons she was keeping to herself.

*Is she remembering that her death is my fault? Or wondering why I'm still alive, when twenty good people died here because I wasn't able to get the Normandy clear?* Those questions and others like them had assaulted him for days.

Shepard's voice was heavy, her mind clearly elsewhere. "Call Mercer and have her prep the shuttle."

"No," Joker said.

That got her attention. She turned to look at him, forehead creasing in surprise.

"Sorry. I –" he turned his head to hide his face beneath the brim of his cap, "I'd like to take the shuttle down this time." If she wanted to avoid him, she'd tell him no. Otherwise, he'd be the one in that shuttle. He hated the thought of Mercer being the one to see the bones of his baby. It was his failure, and it was private.

She nodded, understanding in her eyes. "Of course."

Shepard didn't say anything as he circled the crash site, and he was too caught up in his own thoughts to break the silence. The *Normandy* – the *real* Normandy – lay in jagged pieces under a blanket of snow. Cliffs of fire-blackened metal jutted up out of the ground, serene and rugged as any natural landscape. The ship that had been a live thing beneath his hands was now as still as stone under two years of snow.

He settled the kodiak gently down a safe distance from the debris, and Shepard stood up. The only sound was the hiss of her helmet seals activating as she stepped towards the cabin door and the airlock.

He was wishing fervently for some hint as to what she felt when she placed a hand on his shoulder. He tried to think of something to say – good luck? I'm sorry? – and failed. *Fuck it.* Instead he put his hand over her armored one on his shoulder. He couldn't see her eyes well through the faceplate, but she squeezed his shoulder gently.

"It'll be okay."

He wasn't sure whether she said it for him, or her, or both of them, but he nodded. The rush of warmth that filled him seemed to come from her hand under his, though he knew the armor prevented him feeling her body heat. *She doesn't despise me.*

Shepard slipped her hand free and went out into the cold.

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Shepard spent some time walking around the remains of the Normandy, with Joker a silent passenger via her helmet feed. The scene was oddly peaceful; it was hard to associate the still wreckage with the fear and fire of the attack that took them down. He said a mental good-bye to the ship as Shepard examined each part, eyes following her fingers as she ran them slowly over
cold metal.

*I couldn't save you, baby, but I'll do better this time.*

Then she found the first dog-tag.

They looked like the same tags troops had been wearing for centuries, but radio chips made them easy to find even in the heavy snow and debris. Shepard was using the sensor equipment built into her armor to find them, supplemented with her omnitool when a signal was weak.

The collection of silver tags wrapped around her wrist grew.

When she knelt down to pick up the last, near the ruins of the CIC, she stayed there. The vid-feed picture narrowed until it only showed one piece of wreckage; through the front screen he could see her, a small figure against the landscape, forehead leaning on a piece of the hull.

He listened to her heavy, shuddering breath, the sound of swallowed tears, and cursed himself for being so damn useless.

He wanted to go out there, to hug her or hold her or just be near by, but the broken ground between them was slick with ice and treacherous with drifted snow. Rods or no, he'd hurt himself if he fell, and he *would* fall – or break something trying to avoid it. Then she'd swallow her grief and help him, and she'd probably be kind about it, maybe claim that anyone could trip on a surface like that, while she glided past obstacles as if they weren't there, every action disproving her words. If he was very unlucky, she'd wait in the medbay while Chakwas patched him up, and he could watch any hope of being seen as anything but fragile die as he gritted his teeth against the pain.

But damn it, *someone* should be out there with her. He may be a prickly bastard some of the time – most of the time – but he still knew that being there for a grieving friend was the right thing to do. And he couldn't do it. The sparkling ice stretched between him and Shepard, a deadly reminder that sometimes doing the thing that felt *right* was impossible. *Especially for me.*

There was a faint click over the line. Shepard had turned her radio off, completing her isolation.

He wished the damn planet was less heavy-handed with it's metaphors.

When Shepard returned to the shuttle, she stayed in the aft section. He flew back alone.

——

Shepard liked to work with the sound of her crew in her ears, out where she could keep track of everything and be available to anyone who needed her. She usually spent her free time in the mess. From the time she'd been a child, there had been safety in numbers. On the cold streets or on a battlefield, isolation was deadly. She made people hers, and then she made them her home.

Stepping out of the shuttle, she knew she couldn't face any of them. She was out the door and halfway to the elevator before Joker even had the kodiak powered down, headed for the privacy of her quarters. Seeing the Normandy's grave had hit hard. Too hard. She needed the crew's respect, even their awe – she absolutely *couldn't* let them see her undone by a dead ship.

In her cabin she stripped hastily and got in the shower. The computer in her armor would show that her suit had maintained a perfect body temperature the entire time she'd been planet-side, but she felt like the cold of Alchera had seeped into her bones. She folded her arms across her breasts and hugged herself, trying to soak up the heat of the water.
In the shower, even she didn't have to know if she shed tears.

She'd seen strong marines weep at the funerals of friends. Sometimes she wished she could join them. It wasn't self-control that held the tears back. As much as she might want the release, as deeply as she might care, she couldn't cry where anyone could see her.

She'd lost people before. From her first unofficial command when she'd pulled together civilians in defense of Elysium to the awful cold moment when she'd left Ashley Williams to her death on Virmire, she'd seen lives hang on her decisions. She'd grieved, but each death had made her more determined.

These deaths felt different.

She didn't delude herself that they'd died for her; they'd died for the alliance. Most of them were career navy, and they knew the risks they took every day. She'd just happened to be their commander. That she hadn't seen them die, hadn't been there for their memorials, felt like a betrayal of the people she'd led. Why? She'd never believed in an afterlife; no angry spirits were upset at her for missing their funerals. Dead was dead.

Except when it wasn't.

Her crew hadn't been given a chance to come back. Most of them had families and sweethearts waiting at home; people who'd mourn them. Gruff Presley had talked about his grandchildren to anyone who'd listen. And yet she was the one who was standing here.

You never expected life to be fair. Why start now?

No grieving family would have received Shepard's folded flag.

No one had.

With a start, she realized that she'd probably had a funeral. If she dug around the extranet, she could probably find vid of one of her superiors saying something serious over her own empty coffin.

She shivered despite the heat of the water, finally confronting the real reason the wreck of the Normandy had been able to strip off all of her armor.

She'd been walking over her own grave.

The silent, snow-covered hulk of the Normandy had driven home the fact that she had been gone for two years. Dead. She made herself think the word. Alone on the silent planet, she'd felt like a ghost. Had she turned off her radio because she didn't want Joker to hear her voice break, or because she was afraid he wouldn't hear her at all?

Suddenly she needed people, needed to hear voices and laughter and have people react to her, with the same intensity with which she'd fled them earlier. She shut off the water and stepped out into her cabin.

Yeoman Chambers must have been up; the haphazard pile of armor she'd left in her haste to get under the warm water was gone, and fresh clothing was folded on the chair. She pulled it on. Every rough spot and seam reminded her that she could feel. The band of the sports bra caused a twinge; one of the closed Lazarus scars had popped open a bit, revealing the orange glow of the cybernetics beneath.
She glared at it, then roughly pushed the edges closed again, eliciting a few drops of blood and a small sharp pain. *If you hurt, you're alive.* She decided against medigel. She'd get a butterfly-bandage from Chakwas instead of the analgesic, and let it sting.

The white ink of the tattoo on her arm shone in the dim light, and the black was deeper. The artist had used the two shades with the brown of her skin to create a sunrise that almost glowed, its rays encircling her upper arm.

*I chose that mark. It's my life, no matter who gave it to me.*

She'd never known who gave her life in the first place, and that had never stopped her living it.

They'd have a memorial, she decided, with the people who'd actually known the SR1. Joker and Chakwas, Tali and Garrus... they might have had two years to grieve, but she hadn't. A little more closure wouldn't do the dead any harm. Maybe it would do them all some good. When she pulled herself out of her own thoughts she remembered how quiet Joker had been. She wasn't surprised when she thought about it. He'd loved that ship. Seeing the bones of something that used to fly so freely for him couldn't have been easy for the pilot. They'd drink to all of them tonight – to Presley, to Grieco and Pakti and the rest. And to the Normandy SR1.

She strode over to the bed where her boots were sitting, and saw the helmet.

She didn't know *why* she'd picked it up on Alchera; morbid fascination or just a deeply ingrained pack-it-in-pack-it-out ethic from the tour she'd done guarding exploratory groups, maybe. Chambers must have brought it up to her cabin. It was battered, half blackened by entry into the thin atmosphere of Alchera, but it was still recognizable by the bright red N7 stripe. It was her helmet. The one she'd... she took a deep breath. The one she'd died in.

*It doesn't change anything,* she told herself fiercely.

That didn't mean she had to keep the thing by her bed, though.

She picked up the helmet and went to talk to Chakwas.
Joker nodded to himself as he read the message from Chakwas. Saying he wasn't much for ceremony would be putting it mildly, but they needed something to help put Alchera behind them. Shepard needed it. On the flight back he'd left her in the peace she so obviously wanted, and she'd vanished up to her quarters before he could talk to her. His hurts were old and bitter; they'd had two years to fester, but they'd also had two years to scab over. It was hard to believe that for her it had been less than a few months.

Tali was waiting uncertainly outside the med-bay door. Probably wondering what the protocol is for a human memorial, two years late and held in a med bay. Don't worry, Tal, we don't know either. She fell in beside him when he approached.

Chakwas brushed by them on her way out. "Have to get something from Miss Goto. I'll be back in a moment."

The doctor had dimmed the uncomfortably bright lights, which helped make it feel less like the clinic it was, but the med-bay still smelled nauseatingly of hospital. The air in the one-room lab was constantly being refreshed, keeping the disinfectant odor much fainter than it had been in Arcturus General. Usually Joker could drop by to chat with the doctor with only a hint of queasiness.

Perhaps it was just that it had been a hard day.

The smell of antiseptic and helplessness hit him like a brick.

Joker stopped abruptly just inside the doorway. He wanted to bail, to make a break for fresher air and something to get the taste out of his mouth (not food, shit, not food), but he knew he needed to be there. Especially after all he hadn't been able to do on Alchera. But why the shit'd she have to pick the med-bay? He took a long breath through his mouth, willing his stomach to stop spinning.

In front of him, Tali gave a low gasp.

"What?" He took a step forward, eyes following the direction of her face plate. Someone had left a helmet on the chair, nothing to get –

His brain registered the blackened shell and the red N7 stripe and his lunch rose in his throat. Shepard's helmet. Shepard's old helmet. Shepard's head had been in that when she'd –

A wave of bile filled his mouth and he clamped his jaw shut and bolted for the door. Shit, just let me make it to the head. He cursed his halting stride as he staggered past the mess, fighting back nausea. He made it to the toilet just as his control gave out and his stomach emptied itself, leaving him shaking on the floor.

He wished he could empty his mind as easily. Then he wouldn't need to look at the mental image of Shepard's corpse.

"Mr. Moreau, the men's restroom is on the –"

He took a ragged breath. "Shut UP!"

He heard Kelly's voice raised in argument outside. Shit! It was a relief when Tali, not Chambers, walked into the room.
"Are you alright?"

He nodded, but his stomach had as good a sense of comedic timing as the rest of him, and chose that moment to rebel. Luckily, most of its contents were gone. He slapped at the flush before the smell could set him off again.

*Not my most glorious moment.*

Tali made a disgusted sound, then immediately apologized.

"It's okay, Tal," he sighed, "We think it's gross, too."

"Can I, er, can I get you anything?"

"Yeah, water. In a minute." He hadn't been sick in ages. He'd forgotten how exhausting it was. "Shit. Thanks for holding Chambers off. You really didn't need to follow me. I'm fine."

She looked at him in silence, unreadable behind her mask.

"Really. Probably something I ate. Gardner's cooking."

"Forgive me if I don't believe you." She shook her head. "I'm not alright. No one would ever do that on a quarian ship."

For a moment he thought she meant no one would ever puke; from the way she reacted, he thought maybe quarians didn't have that physical response. Which is probably good, stuck in inside a suit.

"I am not a superstitious person. But to leave a piece of a," the translator stuttered over the quarian word, and came out with 'Death-Suit', "around…" She shuddered.

*Oh. If you live your entire life in a suit, and the mask is your face to all but your closest friends…*

"Shit," he moaned, "I didn't even think about how you'd see it."

"You were busy," she said dryly.

He turned around on the floor, unwilling to try his knees yet. "I don't know what got into me."

"I'm not judging you. I just wanted to know you were alright."

"Yeah, I'm fine." He rested his head on his knees. "It was just an exciting day. My dead ship, my dead commander – I know she's alive, but seeing that helmet –"

"Our friend was killed and then brought back to life. I think it's okay to be a little emotional. It's hard to believe she really died, when I see her walking around the ship. To realize that she was brought back…"

"You think it's hard to believe," he said, "Tali, I watched her die." His voice shook on the last words, and he hid his face on his knees.

He felt the air move as the quarian knelt down next to him and pressed a warm damp washcloth into his hands. He muttered "shit," and gratefully cleaned his face.

"I didn't know that." She put a hand on his shoulder.

"Good thing I'm not in the Alliance anymore," he gestured with the towel, "I'm really taking this like a soldier. Big and tough, that's me."
She snorted. "We lived with her death for two years. Now she's back. It's not like anyone has had to deal with that before."

He laughed weakly. "Funny. That's just what I keep telling Shepard."

"She talks to you about it?" Tali sounded surprised.

"Kinda." Kind of a lot, compared to how close-lipped she'd always been about her personal life before.

"Good." The quarian gave a sigh of relief. "She talked to me once, but she's so quiet."

"Except for the gunfire and explosions?"

"About all the important things." Tali's tone was chiding. "I mean, she talks to everyone else about their lives, but never much about her own. It's very strange. I'm not used to being able to keep so private. On a quarian ship we all know the last time anyone changed their suit gaskets! Someone always pesters things out of you."

"Sounds great," he drawled. "And I thought EDI was bad." He leaned his head back against the wall and looked around while he waited for the strength to stand. There wasn't much to look at. The women's head was the mirror of the men's; the only real distinguishing feature was a piece of flowery pink note paper taped up on the mirror.

He squinted to try and see the writing. It was large and loopy, and he could almost make out –

"'Joy in living is the best cosmetic'," said Tali, disgustedly. "It's Chambers. She changes them. Yesterday it was 'Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.'"

"At least it's cleaner in here than the men's."

Tali cocked her head to the side. "Is that a human gender thing?"

He snorted. "Honestly? I think Gardner just likes spending more time in the women's showers."

"That doesn't make sense! No one is IN here when he cleans!"

"Having a cook slash custodian doesn't make sense either, and yet there he is."

"I check for bugs in here once a week," Tali grumbled.

"Really?" Joker tried to leer at her, but his heart wasn't in it. "Which day?"

"Randomly," she growled. "Don't try to trick me."

"Tali," he shook his head slightly, then thought better of it. "I was teasing. If I wanted to watch girls shower I could find days worth of extranet vid, without making the women I work with hate me. Much simpler." He sighed. "I'm okay now. We'd better get back. EDI's having a conniption about me being here anyway."

Tali stood and offered her hand to pull him up, then quickly withdrew it. "I didn't think, I'm sorry. Would that hurt you?"

Careful of the cripple. No, don't be like that, she's being nice. "Yeah, yanking's no good. Can you hold your arm out like this?" He demonstrated, then used her stiffened arm to help himself carefully to his feet. "Thanks." He stumbled to the sink and rinsed his mouth.
When they left the head they walked right into Chambers. *Carrying the damn helmet*. Joker shamelessly averted his glance. Tali could deal with it.

"I already told you to get *rid* of that *thing*, Cerberus!"

Kelly sounded placating. "Of course, I am! But it seems wrong to just toss something that may be important to Shepard. That's why I brought it to her room –"

"You what?" Tali sounded ready to kill.

"I thought the closure –"

"Look," Joker had had enough, "We don't care where it goes, just get it off the damn ship. Send it to Wrex! Krogan like grisly trophies." He pulled Tali past the yeoman, toward the med-bay where Shepard – living, breathing Shepard – was waiting for them.

The memorial was, not *nice*, but somehow… appropriate. Maybe it was just that he'd been too wrapped up in his own misery at the time, but the joint memorial for the SR1 crew two years ago had felt hollow. Sitting in the darkened med-bay with Garrus and Tali, Chakwas and Shepard, had felt *right*. They drank decent wine and better whiskey (apparently Donnelly had been foolish enough to play poker with Shepard *twice*; he was probably mourning his scotch while they mourned their friends). Joker kept himself to the bare minimum at first, knowing that if he didn't drink he'd raise attention; if neither Chakwas or Shepard realized he'd been throwing up in the women's head, that was fine by him. At least the strong smell of the whiskey helped mask the hospital stink.

When Shepard toasted the SR1, a knot he hadn't realized he carried uncoiled in his stomach. By the time they started laughing, sharing stories of the dead, he drank as deeply as anyone but Shepard. The commander downed two for everyone else's one without showing a sign of it, but Joker noticed that Tali was keeping an eye on her intake, and when they started to yawn and drift off to bed, the bottle went in Chakwas' locker, not back with Shepard.

Joker was as exhausted as if he'd spent the day working out, and mellowed by drink he wanted nothing so much as to sleep for a week, but he couldn't quite drag himself into the crew quarters. Leaving the comradeship of the SR1 team for a rack surrounded by Cerberus people he hardly knew felt wrong, so he gruffly told Mercer to go back to bed and reclaimed the pilot's seat.

He was still sitting there, lost in the well-worn rut of his thoughts, when a light on his screens flashed. He blinked; it wasn't one of the flight indicators. It took him a moment to remember Tali's tracking program. Something on the ship was drawing more power than it should.

He started a manual trace, and found the power was being pulled in the debriefing room. The projection unit didn't draw anywhere near that much, which left only the quantum entanglement communicator. *Bingo. Someone's tattling about something.*

He opened the channel to Shepard's quarters and said softly "Commander."

He had to wait a moment for the reply, and then it was only a sleepy "mmph?"

"I think I've found your hamster."

She murmured "Roger" and he tackled the blocks on the cameras. It was no surprise that whoever had built in the system to disguise the power draw had also taken care to compromise the ship's
surveillance, but it was mostly misdirection – he'd be able to crack it now he knew where to look.

Joker was just getting access to the com-room when Shepard appeared beside him. He jumped in his seat. For a moment he almost hadn't recognized her. She was barefoot, which explained why he hadn't heard her approach, and wore a thin black tank-top over rumpled fatigue pants. She looked younger without the dark lipstick.

"Didn't hear the elevator," he explained his startled response.

"Used a maintenance shaft."

"That was quick."

"Going down usually is."

"Not if you're doing it right." The opening was too good – the words were out of his mouth before his brain caught up. He felt his cheeks go red. He bent to his work, hoping to hide the blush under his hat. *Pretty sure oral sex jokes to my CO in her jammies fills up my quota of inappropriate behavior for the week. I'm going to kill Donnelly and his scotch.*

He could feel her looking at him. *Shit.* His eyes flicked sideways.

She was grinning like a kid with ice-cream.

He was pretty sure his face was flaming under his beard. *Riiight.* "So, the power's going to the com-room."

"You found the little beastie?"

"Looks like. It's enough juice for the quantum entanglement communicator."

She glanced back over her shoulder, clearly considering a physical interruption, then shook her head.

"Bring up the surveillance system."

"I've got a crack program working on it. As soon as the power flux started a whole lotta blocks kicked into gear."

She dropped to her knees next to his chair and leaned forward over his console, thick hair falling in front of her face as she bent over.

Her hair was down.

Somehow that was enough to distract him from the real business at hand. It was always in a tidy bun. It had never really occurred to him that it had a 'down' option. The dim lighting of the cockpit glinted on warm highlights in the dark mass. Shepard shoved it back behind her ear with an irritated gesture as it swung between her and the screen, recalling him to the moment.

The screen flickered as the program did its job, and he leaned in, as eager as Shepard to see their 'hamster.' When the figure on the screen resolved he glanced sideways in surprise, eyes locking with Shepard's.

Yeoman Kelly Chambers.

"Shall I interrupt her transmission?" He was already moving to do so as he asked, but Shepard's
hand shot out snake-quick and closed around his, gently pulling him back from the controls. She held her other finger to her lips, and her mouth opened in a predatory smile, teeth gleaming in the dim light. He nodded understanding.

"When's the last time she called him?" she asked.

There was no question of the recipient of Chambers' message. The QEC was a direct line to the Illusive Man. From the silence in the comm room, it was clear he hadn't been waiting for her call.

"Last power surge was just before we reached Tuchanka," he whispered back. Damn, I should be fuckin' pissed. We're catching a mole on our ship. He wasn't, though. Maybe it was just that he was emotionally exhausted, but he couldn't bring himself to care as much as he should. Something about the whole sneaky situation was ridiculous; he felt like he was watching an action vid. One of the ones with a super-sexy spy protagonist. The kind of movie that was great for a date, since the plot didn't matter nearly as much as the occasional explosions.

His libido took that last thought to its illogical conclusion as he took in Shepard's unkempt state. He wondered if she realized she was still holding his hand.

The Illusive Man's voice interrupted his imagination, thankfully distracting him from his suddenly intense desire for Shepard. And popcorn.

"Ah, Ms. Chambers. It's been awhile. Report."

"We're currently leaving Alchera, the planet where –"

"Where the SR1 crashed, as did Shepard's body. I am aware, Ms. Chambers. How did she react?"

"As far as I can tell, healthy grief. It was very emotional day for the members of the old crew, sir, but I think that's a good thing."

"As far as you can tell?"

"I haven't been able to get Shepard to open up to me."

"A pity, but not unexpected. Anything else I should be aware of, Ms. Chambers?"

"I'm concerned about the inclusion of Subject Zero on the team, sir. She's a very unhappy, unstable individual. The most directed of her anger issues deal with Cerberus, and after what she and Shepard found at Pragia, I –"

"Pragia was an unfortunate occurrence, Ms. Chambers. A tragedy," the illusive man cut in smoothly, "which shall not be repeated. I assure you, their operation did not fall within normal Cerberus procedures."

Shepard snorted, softly. "Troop morale damage control. I wonder if she buys that crap."

"The important question is whether or not Shepard can keep her in line enough to use her."

"So far, sir, but…"

"Speak freely, Ms. Chambers. I hired you for your insight."

"If it ever comes to violence between Shepard and Jack, one of them will die." She said it with total conviction.
Joker glanced sideways at Shepard, who nodded without taking her eyes off the screen. "It's true," she whispered. "If she hadn't figured that out, I'd worry about her credentials."

"You're certain, Chambers?"

"Absolutely. From my observations of Shepard's behavior on Tuchanka and what little we know of her childhood, it's evident that she's used to fighting for position unless there is a clear externally imposed hierarchy, i.e., the alliance military. That behavior is normal for krogan, as well, and I suspect it's why she does so well with them. The key here is that in a fight for dominance the loser is expected to back down. Jack – Subject Zero – is used to fighting for survival, as well as a conditioned endorphin high." Kelly frowned. "If Jack ever pushes Shepard to the point where she tries to prove her position, Shepard won't be able to afford to back down, and Jack won't be able to, period. One of them will die."

It was very uncomfortable to hear Chambers' bald analysis of Shepard's psyche. He whispered "Do you want to cut her off?"

Shepard shook her head and gave his hand a squeeze.

"Do you believe that is likely to occur?"

"Shepard's done an admirable job of keeping things from escalating so far, sir, but Jack will keep pushing. She wants a reaction."

"Do what you can to keep things under control. If the situation becomes too unstable, I may have to come up with a plan for Subject Zero. Anything else?"

"Shepard encountered an old friend – I assume you heard from Operative Lawson?"

"I am informed. Do you have anything to add to her analysis?"

"Not really. Very protective of people she's claimed as her own, past gang and probably criminal activity – nothing we didn't know."

"Understood."

"Oh, and one more thing. I expected Shepard to have some reaction today; I was surprised by the level of reaction in other crew members, particularly the quarian and the pilot."

It was awful to know that someone was watching him like that. Joker had been uncomfortable listening to Chambers talk about Shepard in such bare terms; he hated hearing her talk about him.

The Illusive Man sipped his ever-present drink. "I'm not concerned about the quarian. The pilot…" he gave a tight-lipped grin. "Thinks he caused Shepard's death. We can be sure of his commitment – guilt's a powerful motivator for some people."

Joker could feel Shepard's gaze on him. He didn't turn to meet it. Let me melt into the floor.

"With respect, sir, that's a very oversimplified analysis. It may have been a primary motivator when you assembled project Lazarus – I wasn't on board then, I don't know – but I think he just genuinely likes working with her. Which is impressive in its own right."

"How so?"

"Have you talked to him, sir? And gotten the impression that he liked working with anybody?"
Joker hardly heard the last few sentences. He hated how he'd failed. He hated that she was hearing it this way. He hated how easy he'd been to manipulate. *So drunk and depressed you'd fly for a terrorist organization, damnit, she deserves better* – "I'm sorry," he choked out, "Flying was all I cared about, and I failed you and the ship."

Shepard slapped the mute button. "Jeff, listen."

She never used his real name. He wasn't sure that he liked it.

There was no escape. She'd twisted around in front of him, making it impossible to avoid her eyes without making it totally obvious that he was doing so, and he was stiff and sore and couldn't get up and walk away, not quickly.

She looked up at him from where she was crouched on the floor, one hand steadying herself on the edge of his seat. "Jeff," she said quietly, "It wasn't your fault."

He'd wanted this confrontation, hadn't he? He'd planned to admit his guilt – not to apologize; nothing could ever be apology enough – on his own terms. He couldn't look at her; he closed his eyes. "If I'd left when you told me to…"

"Things might have been different. Or not. You might have been caught in the fire that tore the hull over the CIC, I might have died setting the distress beacon. We can't know, and it doesn't matter. The only ones at fault are the Collectors."

He wanted to believe her. He did. Didn't he? But if he did, why did his own traitorous mind come up with so many arguments? Why couldn't he let it go? All the recrimination he'd heaped on himself, the guilt like an old blanket, so familiar that he hardly noticed it during the day, and forgot it entirely when he saw Shepard smile.

"Jeff, I…" it was rare to hear Shepard at a loss for words, "If I'd known… if I'd realized you felt that way, I'd have talked to you earlier. It didn't even occur to me, because I never blamed you."

Her voice – Shepard's voice, Shepard who talked down gun-toting lunatics and coolly made life-or-death calls for thousands of people – was shaking. He opened his eyes in disbelief. She was gaz ing at him intently, as if she could will him to believe her.

"And… if that's why you're here. If that's the only reason –" her voice cracked on the word 'only'.

"No!" That fractured his silence. How could he explain how, how damn complicated everything was? *I lost you and the Normandy and the battle we were fighting and I fell apart. Now all three of us are alive and fighting again, and that's more than I ever let myself dream of.* He took a deep breath and said, "Kelly… Kelly was right about me, too."

She paused a moment, taking a breath to collect herself. When she opened her eyes they shone with… hope?

"I would hate to think you were only here because… you shouldn't be here out of some obligation."

The weakness in her voice hit him like a brick, and he cursed Kelly and the Illusive Man and himself, for not having this conversation earlier. Now she thought he was only here for his own guilty conscience. How could he make it clear that there was nowhere else he'd rather be, and no one else he'd rather be flying for? She was so close, all he had to do was reach out and touch her scarred cheek, to tell her he'd be here anyway, even if he'd had no part in her death, even if Cerberus tried to keep him away. Even if the chairs weren't leather. His mind was roiling, feelings of guilt and relief tangling together, but one thing he knew he did not want to do was fuck up this
unexpected chance at absolution. He groped for some way to bring their conversation back to more familiar ground. "Besides the obligation to save the whole damn galaxy?"

Her eyebrow twitched, but she didn't rise to the bait.

He took a deep breath. "Commander, if you want me off your ship, you'll have to make it an order. Otherwise I'm staying right here."

"Good," she let it out in a sigh and then gave a weak grin, "You'd better." She caught his gaze again, face all serious. "You didn't kill me, Joker. Believe that." His chair sagged as she used her grip on the edge to lever herself up. "We'll talk more, but now we both need sleep. And that's an order, Joker."

"What about Chambers?"

She suddenly looked exhausted. "Record it, would you? Not sure what to do about it yet."

He nodded assent, not sure if he could trust his voice. She was turning to leave, and relief mixed with frustration and loss. He wanted time alone to think; he wanted her to come back; he wanted to say she was lying, that at some level she had to blame him, because he did, because why the hell else had he wasted two years of his life? He wanted to know that when he woke up in the morning their old camaraderie would still be there, not drowned in pity.

He wanted to kiss her.

For a moment, he felt the weight of her hand on the back of his chair, then it lifted. "I'm glad you're here, Joker." Her voice was quiet. "We need you."

Startled, he whipped his head around. "Who's 'we'?"

She was walking away, one hand trailing along the bright metal of the ship. "The Normandy and me."
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rhi couldn't believe she hadn't realized that Joker was carrying a hefty helping of survivor's guilt. *Idiot*. Of *course* he would be. She kicked herself for letting him stew, replaying past conversations, suddenly afraid that what she thought had been genuine friendship had just been a sort of penance.

Damn Kelly Chambers. What was she going to do about her?

It had been too many revelations for one night. She would have liked a good brawl to clear her head; failing that, a long walk that didn't involve doing laps around the Normandy. *Or at least a little time to think.*

Instead, she was going to a party.

After talking with Joker, Shepard had gone straight to bed, vowing to sort out everything in the morning. She'd slept deeply as soon as she hit the sheets – for all of two hours. She'd awoken abruptly to the sound of EDI's voice. It was a harsher awakening than Joker's had been just hours before.

Of course, she hadn't been pleasantly dreaming of the *AI*. That may have had something to do with it.

They'd left the Alchera system with plenty of time to reach Bekenstein and the party Kasumi Goto was determined to infiltrate, but fate, luck, or sheer bloody coincidence had determined otherwise. Mercer had picked up a distress beacon, and the Normandy was en route to check it out. Answering an SOS always took priority. Space was too big to hope someone else would come along, and it might be your ship crying for help next time. Hell, it *had* been her ship, once.

The beacon came from a wreck on an inhospitable dirt ball, and after just barely managing to get *to* the damn thing, they'd had to fight their way back to the shuttle through a small army of malfunctioning mechs. She'd returned to the Normandy with nothing to show for their detour but the ship's black-box, and they'd had to haul ass to Bekenstein to make up for lost time.

She'd been headed back to bed when Kasumi and Chakwas cornered her. Apparently getting ready for a party was more important than sleep.

*This is ridiculous.*

Shepard was sitting in the middle of her quarters in the dress Kasumi had bought, trying to pretend the thing didn't make her uncomfortable as hell, while the ship's surgeon did mysterious things to her hair. She'd spent the first five minutes trying to catch her reflection in the fish tank, before admitting the back-lighting made it hopeless. Then she'd read her cover-story. Twice.

*It's like a spy vid,* she thought. *They always end up at improbably fancy parties.* She'd had a few friends in Intelligence over the years, and they'd assured her that *real* espionage looked a lot like paperwork.

"I know! We need some music!"

Kasumi's voice was chipper, but her body betrayed her nervousness. The upcoming mission was
her chance to recover the last memories of her dead partner, and for all her light-hearted way of speaking, she clearly cared a great deal. She'd been moving ceaselessly. Now she darted behind Shepard's back, towards the sound-system.

Rhi turned her head to warn Kasumi, "Turn the vol –"

"Keep still!" Chakwas chided her.

A booming thunder of bass and dual drum kits shook the cabin. Chakwas and Kasumi jumped.

"I usually turn it up slowly." Rhi said mildly.

"WHAT?" The doctor yelled.

Kasumi slapped wildly at the sound-system controls, and silence descended. "Whew. I expected something more..." she looked at Shepard, who had uncrossed her legs again, and shook her head. "I'm not sure what I expected. Legs, Shep!"

Rhi pulled her knees together. Whoever dreamt up clothing that requires constant attention just to wear should be shot. Her armor didn't require this much training, and it had a full VI. The dress limited her actions instead of expanding them. Armor won any day. It's a really pretty blue, too.

"Okay, no music then," Kasumi sighed.

"I was enjoying it," Rhi muttered.

The thief did another lap. Rhi's head twitched involuntarily, trying to keep her in her field of view, and Chakwas snapped, "Ms. Goto, stay where the commander can see you before we are all driven crazy."

Kasumi startled, then settled down cross-legged on the deck matting well within Shepard's line of sight.

"That's better," Chakwas declared as the tension left Shepard's shoulders. "I think we've almost got it."

"It's just hair," grumbled Rhi. A lock was tickling the side of her face. When she moved to brush it away, Chakwas batted at her hand.

"Really, Commander. You have lovely hair. Why keep it long if you're not going to do something with it once in awhile?"

_How is a bun not 'doing something with it'? It's something._ After I enlisted and could rely on a shower every day, the shaved-head thing lost its appeal. Her hair had also hidden the old gang tattoo over her left ear, but the doctor didn't need to know that. The tattoo wasn't there anymore, anyway. She wasn't sure how to feel about that. Must not be important, then.

Kasumi looked up from whatever she'd been contemplating on her omnitool. "You used to have the same hairstyle as Jack?"

Rhi decided not to point out that it was really more of a lack-of-hair style. "Mmhm. Jack says was a cult thing. For me it was just parasite-prevention chic."

Jack. The biotic had been keeping a truce of sorts with Miranda after their spat, but it seemed to be fraying. She needed to win her, to connect somehow, or else risk the deadly confrontation
Chambers had predicted. Another thing on the to-do list. If Kelly gave me reports like that instead of saying that everyone needs a fucking hug, she might actually be useful. Creepy as hell, but useful.

"Oh, that's a holo I want to see!" Kasumi was practically bouncing.


"Speaking of holos..." the doctor turned to the two on the table. The first had been captured on the Citadel, just after the defeat of Sovereign. Shepard was standing on a pile of rubble, eyes lifted to some distant goal – I was probably thinking of getting back to the Normandy and taking a shower – armor scorched but unbroken. Triumphant. Yup. Definitely thinking about a shower.

The other image showed a much younger (and cleaner) Rhi Shepard, in crisp dress blues, receiving the Star of Terra.

Chakwas nodded to herself. "Between the context, the fashion, and the small fact that you are supposed to be dead, I don't think anyone will recognize you, commander. You were wearing a helmet in the image they used for recruitment, and the Blitz was nine years ago." She clucked. "Humans have such woefully short attention spans."


"Oh honestly, commander," Chakwas chuckled. "Here, go look in the mirror. I'm finished."

She leaned over to fasten the straps on the awful shoes, causing Kasumi to cover her face in her hands.

"Y'know, doc, you seem pretty adept at this cloak-and-dagger stuff," she said as she walked (carefully) to the head, "You should go to the party."

"Nonsense, commander," Chakwas said. "Just relax, and you'll be fine. By the by, Kasumi said a side-arm would not be out of place, but we agree that even the predator is rather, crude."

"Any other ideas?" Shepard was distracted by her own reflection. A few wavy locks of hair framed her face, softening her cheekbones. The rest was pinned up in an artlessly tousled look. She wasn't sold on any of it, but as long as she could twist it back quickly in a fight she wouldn't complain.

She stalked back out. The dress would get a reprieve. She was going after the bastard who invented heels, first. "I'm not entering that den unarmed."

"Of course not." Chakwas had a decidedly devious smile. "I have something you can borrow that should do."

The petite pistol the doctor handed her practically oozed credits. Shepard hefted it; it was reassuringly solid for all its small size. Chakwas was a superb shot; anything she chose would be functional as well as elegant.

"Damn," Rhi murmured, "this is the first part of this mission I like. It's beautiful. But where...?" She looked down at herself in uncertainty. The dress fit tightly from the high collar down to her hips, with a slight... interruption... to show cleavage, which was deeply unnerving. Rhi had never had cleavage in her life, and she damn well would have noticed if Cerberus had made any additions in the boob department.

*Besides, Miranda would never do it. She hates competition.*
No, it had to be some impressive structural engineering on the part of the dress-maker. *It must be pulling fat from my ass. Which would explain why it's so uncomfortable.* In light of her new respect for its abilities, she grudgingly upgraded the dress from "inconvenient non-combatant" to "adversary."

Impressive feats of chest manipulation aside, it didn't leave anywhere for a concealed gun.

She looked up in time to see Kasumi exchange a look with the doctor, who passed over a tangle of black leather straps with a slightly sheepish expression. Shepard looked at them in confusion until Chakwas demonstrated the correct placement of the thigh holster with surprisingly experienced hands.

"Fuck," she sighed, "I really am in an action vid, aren't I?"

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Joker stretched in his chair, watching the bright lights of Bekenstein spin below them. *Join the navy! See interesting places – from 900 kilometers up.*

He was in an odd mood.

He kept going back to the guilt he should feel, the certainty that Shepard blamed him for her death, and finding it wasn't there. Like obsessively poking at the place where a tooth had been. Shepard's assurances had lifted a weight from his heart, but the weight had been there long enough to leave a dent.

He'd slept through the detour to the wreck, and had seen Shepard only briefly before she closeted herself (with Kasumi and Chakwas, of all people) to prepare for Goto's mission. *Or heist, or whatever it is.*

It didn't help that Kelly Chambers was sitting next to him. Since he hadn't heard anything about how Shepard planned to deal with the spy in their midst, he had to pretend he didn't know anything about her night-time reports to the Illusive Man. *It did* help that he'd never been particularly friendly to her to begin with. *Ha! My facade of irritability will hide my deep-seated... irritability. I am a super spy.*

He had spies on the brain.

Most of the crew were enjoying a brief liberty on one of Bekenstein's orbital stations, so there weren't many around to hear Shepard order the hangar and engineering decks cleared of personnel during shuttle take-off.

*Oh, come on, commander, that's like saying 'don't push the red button'.* He pulled up the hangar feed just as Shepard and Goto exited the elevator.

His jaw dropped.

*Whoa.*

No wonder she'd ordered the deck cleared.

The dress was form-fitting, black, and moved like leather. Her hair was partially down, thick waves brushing one cheek. High heels emphasized every line of muscle in her long brown legs.

She looked awful.
It wasn't that the dress couldn't have been drop-dead sexy, or that the heels didn't do absolutely mind-boggling things to her ass. Her body was amazing, but... he cringed in empathetic embarrassment. Shepard, so fluid on the battlefield, so confident in her physicality in the gym, looked uncomfortable and awkward. She'd been sexier in her PJs.

*Actually, she was hellah hawt in her PJs.* It was usually just a little bit cold on the command deck, to keep everyone alert. When Shepard had shown up last night in a thin tank-top he'd decided he'd never complain about the temperature again.

"What's that?" Kelly had been lost in a data pad, but now she leaned forward to see what he was looking at. He moved his hand to cover the screen, but not fast enough.

"Oh, dear." The normally perky red-head sounded despondent.

"Yeah."

"She's walking *way* too fast to pull that look off. Which is her channel?"

She'd have her earpiece, even unarmored – the tiny disc stuck to the inside of her tragus was invisible. Still, he suspected that advice from *Kelly Chambers* was the last thing the commander needed to hear right now.

"Shit no, Chambers, you'll only make it worse. Believe me, she's uncomfortable now. She is *not* going to like that we're watching."

"You're right." Chambers looked at him as if he'd sprouted horns.

Yeah, yeah, I don't like makin' nice to people, *that doesn't mean I don't pay attention.* Especially to the commander.

"Okay," she said decisively, "Give me Kasumi."

"Chambers..."

"Jeff. You do your job well. Let me do mine."

Reluctantly, he opened Kasumi's channel. Chambers leaned toward the console when she talked, as if she was in the room with the thief and sharing girly secrets. It was kinda funny. Her advice was good, though.

"Kasumi, hang back a minute. That's good. Now, you need to coach Shepard –"

"I've been trying," the thief answered with a note of desperation, "but whenever I say anything she *thinks* about it more and then she gets worse."

"It's okay, we can work with this! Ignore the specifics – those will take care of themselves. Just, hmm... I know. Tell her to think of negotiating with Aria. Or, Hock's guests are just a gang of thugs and she's walking into their territory. They're wearing fancier clothes than normal, is all."

Kelly was positively enthusiastic; she'd really warmed to the challenge. *I suppose there aren't a lot of opportunities to practice tactical psychology,* Joker mused.

Kasumi catch up to Shepard and say something. When the two women started walking towards the shuttle again, Shepard's shoulders were back and she had a confident saunter. She looked a hundred times better.
She'd always look wrong in strappy heels, though.

Chambers smiled, pleased with herself. "You can't let thugs see your fear. The commander knows that in her bones; you can see it whenever she's on Omega."

Joker didn't want to give her any credit, but her advice had worked. Still... "Shit. I hope Goto's cover story gives her a reason for dem arms." Shepard wasn't body-builder-bulky, but she had the kind of physique you could only get when physical activity was your livelihood and punching the shit out of things was your favorite form of stress-relief. That kind of muscle was enough to turn any human's head. *It's certainly turning mine.*

"She's supposed to be a mercenary leader – the hands-on type. It's perfect. Kasumi is very clever."

Suspicion welled up. "How'd you know?"

"I asked, silly." Kelly twinkled at him.

He grumbled a non-response and settled down to wait.

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Joker breathed a sigh of relief as Shepard activated her helmet's communications suite, giving him a full view of the entrance to Hock's vault. The hours spent out of contact had worn on him, even though he knew that they'd have radioed if things went badly.

"Everyone okay down there?"

"Kasumi won't let me steal anything," Shepard pouted.

Joker was dumbfounded for a moment. "Uh, commander, you sure you guys didn't just exchange scripts there? I'm pretty sure that line was supposed to go the other way 'round."

"I resent that," Kasumi muttered. "I have some discrimination."

"I have discrimination," Shepard retorted, "I didn't like any of the people up there. Very discriminating. We should have taken their stuff."

Goto didn't reply. She was focused on her omnitool, working on the last barrier before the vault. There was a hiss as the doors slid open. "Yatta!" she said, quietly. "We're in."

Shepard gave the statue of Saren one last look, then spat between his feet and followed Kasumi out the door.

"Hey, Commander, impressive." Joker noticed Kelly's look. "I mean, it would have been when I was twelve. I'm totally more mature now. Stop looking at me like that."

"Shh," She hissed at him, "I'm listening."

"They're not saying anything."

Kasumi was wandering the vault, wide-eyed, obviously impressed.

Shepard sounded less so. "Damn, look at all this stuff."

"He has excellent taste."
"Coulda fooled me. What's the point of it all, anyway?" Shepard had paused in front of a piece of metal that looked to Joker like something out of a quarian's scrap bin. "He doesn't even show it to anyone. What's he do, come down here and jerk off?"


"I can't take you anywhere," Goto sighed.

"I've been trying to convince you of that for weeks, and now you get it? A little late, Kasumi." They'd moved on to a statue of a rachni. "Now that brings back memories. Want one for the crew deck, Joker?"

"Thanks but no. I'd be expecting it to spawn little explode-y statues any minute."

They turned to peruse another row of displays, and Shepard's camera fell on a sub-machine gun.

"Can I take that?"

"Yes!" Kasumi was ignoring her, intent on a tiny piece of hardware that had been sitting beside the weapon. "My god. There it is – his grey-box. We've found it."

As the thief delicately lifted the device from its pedestal, Donovan Hock's image sprang into being in the middle of the room, larger than life and twice as ugly.

"Shit," said Joker. Hock was talking, preening for having outwitted the master thief. "He's like a villain in a bad vid."

"Story of my life," Shepard murmured back, "Let's hope he makes the same mistakes."

Her pistol shot shattered the priceless sculpture next to her, and all hell broke loose.

"EDI! Get in their system, find them a floor-plan." Shepard and Kasumi were everywhere at once, cutting down Hock's goons before they knew what hit them. They'd be ready to make their escape soon, and he needed to be ready for them. "Somewhere the shuttle can land."

He was putting the Normandy in position for the drop when Shepard radioed for the shuttle. "Hear that, Mercer? Kodiak, now!"

"All fired up, sir!"

EDI broke in. "Mr. Moreau, readings from the mansion indicate anti-aircraft installations."

"What the shit? It's a god-damned house!" He skimmed the data. Hock's estate had lit up like a New Vegas casino as soon as Shepard started shooting, and amid the countless paranoid security measures there were two turrets aimed at the sky-way. Shit. "Mercer, belay that! Up here on the double, you have the Normandy."

"Sir?"

He was already out of his chair and moving for the elevator.

Shepard squeezed off another round at the gunship, cursing. "Why'd you pick a fight with this paranoid bastard?"
"Is it really paranoid if we are out to get him?" Kasumi quipped back. Her humor sounded brittle. They'd already fought their way through more than two people could realistically hope to overcome. The YMIR mechs had been bad enough. The gunship was the cherry on top.

She had to admit they were doing damn well, though. Between Kasumi's tactical cloak and her own biotics, they were almost never where their enemy expected them to be. They'd left a trail of hapless mercs who'd been carefully aiming down the corridor when the thief stabbed them in the back or Shepard appeared in front of their face with a shotgun and a shoulder to the solar plexus. Poor sods. Thought they drew light-duty guarding the rich asshole's baubles.

She sprayed the ship with fire, thankful for the longer range on her new stolen toy. If she could just bring the shields down – bingo. Quicker than thought, Goto was in the air, landing on the gunship itself and permanently disabling its shields.

Shepard hadn't taken the thief out on many missions; her highly specialized skill set hadn't seemed useful in a firefight. She was reconsidering that now. However high-brow Goto might be about her 'calling', somewhere she'd learned to fight, and fight dirty. Shepard sensed a story Kasumi wasn't telling.

She heard the sound of the approaching shuttle just as a careful shot finally took out the gunship, and she cursed again when the welcome hum was covered by the unmistakable sound of turret fire.

Shepard ran for the edge of the platform, hoping they were within her range, knowing she'd never make it, and saw the kodiak narrowly avoid a missile. Fuck, Mercer, that's cutting it close! The shuttle twisted around; soon it would be in range of the second turret's sensors. Sure enough, a flash lit up its muzzle. Shepard's heart clenched, sure that she was watching Mercer's death and totally unable to do anything about it. Time seemed to slow.

In the moment before impact, the kodiak's drives went dark, the fire of thrusters and the tell-tale hum of mass-effect drives disappearing entirely. For a split-second it seemed to hang impossibly in the air, then gravity reasserted itself and the shuttle plummeted towards the waves below.

The missile from the second turret flew through the space it had been and hit the first turret, which went up in a blaze of fire.

Shepard reached the edge of the platform just in time to see the kodiak's drives fire up again, so close it kissed the waves before the mass-effect field came fully online and told gravity to go fuck itself. She whooped as it rose from the water, hatch already opening to welcome them in. She didn't wait for it to touch down.

Kasumi jumped in lightly after her. "Wow! I thought Mercer was a goner for a moment, there."

Shepard thumped the bulkhead between cabin and cockpit. "That wasn't Mercer," she said, chuckling. "Can't you tell?"

"Aww, commander, you noticed!" Joker's smug voice confirmed.

The thief was already lost in the contents of the grey-box, reliving memories.

Joker limped out of the shuttle cockpit looking inordinately pleased with himself. "I have to admit, commander, Mercer's right," he shook his head ruefully, "The kodiak's really a bear."

Shepard was about to say something about docking his pay for every bad pun, but was interrupted
by the sight of a very angry Miranda Lawson bearing down on her. The crew had returned from liberty minus one. Jack was in the station's jail. Rhi shared a long-suffering glance with her helmsman, who tossed off a cocky salute, and then went with Lawson to make sure the ex-con stayed ex.

A little smooth talking and a mind-boggling amount of credits saw all of them back at the Normandy.

"She was buying drugs, Shepard," Miranda's mouth twisted with distaste, "and bringing them aboard the ship."

Shepard raised an eyebrow at Jack. "That why you get yourself thrown in the clink?"

"Easiest way to find out who's selling," the biotic growled.

_But not the cheapest_, Shepard thought. Jack's bail had just cost the illusive man a lot of money. No wonder Lawson was pissed.

"What'd you buy, Jack?"

The shorter woman sneered at her, and Rhi barely contained her sigh. Jack made everything difficult.

"Jack, I'll say this once. If you take Hallex, lsd, atropine, or any shit of that nature, I'll have you spaced before your drugged brain can figure out what's going on. You can ride out your bad trip in vacuum; I am not willing to put up with it."

"I don't do that hallucinogenic shit." Jack look startled. "How'd you know I'd trip bad?"

"I did," she answered. Miranda stared at her, and she explained dryly, "Psychedelics aren't generally a good idea for those of us with highly developed fight/flight responses."

She'd experimented with hallucinogens exactly once, in a locked room with a trusted friend. At the time, her conclusion was a little less clinical and a little more "Holy fuck, that shit will mess you up." Her friend had agreed, vehemently and with more imaginative cursing, as Rhi had stitched the gash she'd made in his face using a needle hastily cleaned in open flame.

Really, she'd come a long way since then.

"Fuck, it's just weed. Wasn't even what I was after."

Shepard held out her hand, palm up, and Jack grudgingly tossed her the bag. The commander pocketed it, and nodded dismissal. "We're done here. This was the first and only time I'm bailing you out, understood? Next time you get yourself locked up, you're staying there."

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It was late when Shepard ventured down to Jack's cave. She was exhausted, but the final confrontation with the gunship had left her full of adrenaline. Restless. The biotic was still awake, simmering.

"Whatcha want now, bitch?"

Rhi reached into her pocket, pulled out the bag she'd confiscated earlier, and tossed it back to Jack underhand. "Returning something of yours."
"The fuck? You take it just to play all clean-and-proper for the fucking cheerleader? 'Cause that's some pathetic shit right there, Shepard, some grade-A brown-nosed pathetic shit."

Jack never stopped moving. She paced, she slunk, she vaulted onto crates. Shepard didn't respond with anything but her eyes, leaning back against the wall with studied nonchalance.

"No. I took it to have Chakwas check it out. I don't want to have you all fucked up on some contaminated crap."

Jack stared at her through narrowed eyes as she fished a paper out of her pocket and started to roll one. *Great, Rhi thought,* *that'll give the life support tech's something to look at when it gets in the air-filters.*

There was silence as Jack finished, lit up, and took a long hit, then she rounded on Shepard in suspicion. "Why you still down here? You cut this with something? You poisoning me?"

Rhi shook her head, calmly, and held out one hand. It took Jack a moment to figure out what she was asking. Her brow was creased in confusion as she handed over the joint. "Why'd you bring it back if you're just gonna take it away ag –"

Rhi didn't say anything; just took a long drag and handed it back. Inside she was chuckling at Jack's apparent confusion.

*Damn, that felt good.*

She was almost always on edge since her revival, and that went double around Jack. The look of nonchalance was an act to keep things with the convict from escalating, and the act took a lot of self control. The drug hit her system as gentle relaxation, and she welcomed it.

Couldn't welcome too much more if it, or she wouldn't be useful, though.

Jack was still staring at her warily, joint loose in her hand. Shepard shook her head and regretfully released her mouthful of smoke to say, "Don't waste it. That tasted like the good stuff."

Jack nodded. "All the way from Earth." She shook off her confusion and retreated into anger. She always did, sooner or later. "You never said you did drugs."

"It was never relevant." Truth be told, she hadn't touched anything in years; she'd gone straight as soon as she hit boot camp and, aside from the very occasional toke with a few marine buddies on shore leave after particularly nasty tours, she hadn't looked back. She'd seen the ravages real drug use brought far too often. The time they'd had to haul the needle-marked corpse out of the house they'd been using would be burned in her mind forever. "Jack. You're not the only one who needs help chilling out. In the last 36 hours I've cussed at the illusive man, I've thrown a YMIR into a wall, and I've bailed your ungrateful tattooed ass out of jail... but I haven't actually slept."

Wordlessly, Jack passed it back.

*Ironic, really,* she thought as she took another hit. On the streets, she'd been far too concerned with survival to risk slowing her reaction time or altering her perceptions with drugs. She'd rubbed shoulders with dealers and runners, but it had taken the frustration – and safety – of a fancy upscale boarding school to get her to *use* anything. Shepard pulled herself away from her reminiscence with unusual difficulty, looking out of half-lidded eyes as she passed the joint back.

Jack was finally relaxing, her constant movement slowed. It was the closest to companionable they'd ever been.
And all it took was mind-altering substances.

Damn, Anderson wouldn't approve of her command technique this time. For once she was lucky he wasn't her boss. She didn't know much about The Illusive Man, but what she did know included chain-smoking and a constant supply of alcohol. He didn't seem like one to go halfway on his vices.

"I wonder what your big boss would think of this, Commander," Jack said. The rank came out as a sneer, but it didn't sound like her heart was in it.

Surprised, Shepard chuckled, then swore as the smoke escaped her. "I was just thinking he's probably snorting blow off the ass of an asari hooker or something." Damn, that chuckle had come perilously close to a giggle. Time to go to bed. "Course, 'blatant hypocrisy' doesn't even measure up on his list of sins, so why give a shit?"

Jack almost cracked a grin at that.

It's a start, anyway. Another long, quiet moment passed before Shepard straightened up from the wall, yawning.

"Thanks, Jack," she said quietly.

Jack said "You're welcome," and then looked surprised that she'd said it. Shepard smiled to herself, then climbed the stairs back up to engineering. She'd sleep well tonight.

Miranda interrupted her while she was getting a snack on the way to her quarters.

One of the funny things about the human adrenal and endorphin systems was that, given the right panic situation, they could temporarily jump start the body despite any number of inebriants. Shepard felt her brain kick into overdrive through her comfortable haze. How much particulate is in the air down there? Did it already permeate my clothes? Can't chance her smelling my breath. Is this what having parents feels like? Does she recognize the smell? Miranda wouldn't use anything that lessens productivity - but she'd look for it in others, so of course she does. Pity, it'd probably be good for her. I wonder if we could lock her in her quarters and hotbox her cabin from life-support?

Shit. I've reached the silly stage.

"Can it wait 'till morning, Miranda?"

"I'll be brief, Shepard, I promise, it's just..." she was uncharacteristically flustered, "Do you miss Nessie?"

Shepard shrugged. "Do you miss your sister?"

"I..." Miranda looked taken aback. "Can you miss something you don't really know? I'm glad I talked to her. I'd like to talk to her again. But I never knew her."

Rhi nodded. "Exactly."

"But you knew each other before."

"Really?" She shrugged. "Miranda, when I knew Nessie, she was seven. I was sixteen. I kept her fed and safe for a bit under a year. Now she's a capable adult woman and despite having a pretty traumatic childhood, she seems to have managed a normal life. I'm glad of that." She smiled.
"Really glad. But... I don't think I know her well enough to miss her."

"Oh. That's... that's how I feel. But I thought..."

You thought it might be something wrong with you, that you didn't feel anything. Rhi thought there was quite a lot wrong with Miranda; her feelings about Oriana seemed like one of the few places she was alright.

"Look, Lawson. You don't know her, so you don't miss her. Nothing strange about that. Be happy for what you gave her – you busted your ass so she could grow up with a life you never had." She was thinking about Ness, bleeding in her arms; another little girl who grew up to have a family and a decent life. "Believe me. She'll be fine, and you'll have time to know her later."

Miranda's seemed to have caught the unspoken parallel Shepard had drawn. "I suppose we do have something in common, after all."

"In that, at least." Rhi smiled at Miranda. "We done good, Lawson."

"We did well, Shepard," the operative corrected.

Rhi rolled her eyes and went up to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Rhi's favorite ridiculous spy vids are Jane Bond (after 70-odd years of James, the franchise determined they needed to reboot for broader apeal, so Jane, his bastard daughter by one of the many bond-girls, followed in her father's footsteps. It worked well for awhile, but it really jumped the shark when they brought in time travel so she could fight with a computer generated young Sean Connery).

Come back in two weeks, when I'll either post the next chapter of the ongoing saga, or the whole thing will devolve into Rhi & Jack's Excellent Adventure, in which they get chewed out by Tali for making a bomb out of 'extra' parts of the Normandy.
Joker woke late and went straight to the helm after his shower, only to find that they were staying put for the moment and he had time for breakfast. In the mess, Shepard was leaning against the counter, sipping from a steaming mug and watching the conversation at the table, where Mercer was excitedly discussing something with Chambers and Goto.

She raised her eyebrow when he came in, looked pointedly at him, then at Mercer, and asked, "Anyone driving this thing?"

Mercer whipped around, clearly flustered, and started to sputter something about orbit and drive discharge. Joker came to her rescue.

"Still have an hour of discharge left before we can get underway." He nodded to the younger pilot. "I checked, her parking job's not too bad. We've got at least two hours before the orbit decays enough to send us all to a horrible fiery death."

As he walked by Shepard's post to grab a tray, he muttered "And you told me to be nice? Jeez, Commander, you almost gave her a heart attack," out of the corner of his mouth.

Shepard's mouth didn't smile, but her eyes did. Her response was equally quiet. "Command hath –"

"it's privileges, yeah, yeah."

"And one of them is ordering helmsmen to miss their breakfast. Walk with me."

He followed, surprised, but not before grabbing a cup of coffee. She didn't say anything, just entered the elevator and punched up deck one.

"What– ?"

She held a finger to her lips. He felt a moment of confusion, then realized she must want to talk about Kelly – somewhere that wasn't bugged. He leaned against the elevator wall in silence until they reached deck one, and followed her into her quarters and the small area that served as an office.

It was only the second time he'd seen her quarters. They were still as military-neat as they'd been when she had them up for drinks; a stray data-pad on the desk was the only sign that someone lived and worked there. Well, that and the hamster. Boochika was running busily on a wheel which, contrary to all known rules of the universe regarding hamster wheels, didn't squeak.

"Is Boochika a boy or a girl?"

"I respect its privacy."

"And the other hamster?" That had to be what she wanted to talk about.

"Pretty sure Chambers is female, Joker."

"Ouch, I walked right into that one." He scowled at her comically. "It's no fair being funny before I've had my coffee. What are you going to do about Kelly?"
"Nothing." She hooked the chair with her ankle and pushed it over to him, then leaned back against her desk.

"What?"

Shepard shrugged. "We know Miranda already sends regular reports – hell, given the amount of time she spends hidden away, probably hourly –"

"Or she has an amazing porn collection."

"Things I did not want to think about with regard to Miranda. Thanks, Joker. Made my day."

_Ha, point to me._ "I live to serve."

"Really?" She raised her eyebrows, a sly grin playing at the corner of her mouth. Her expression hardly changed, but the mirth in her eyes transformed her face.

It caught him off-guard.

It was no fair being _pretty_ before he'd had his coffee, either.

He took a sip and swallowed it while he tried to think of what to say. _She's either flirting or teasing me about not following orders…_ surely the latter was more likely. If he'd followed orders, she wouldn't have died. She'd said she didn't blame him, but… she wouldn't joke about that. Would she?

When he looked up again her face had settled back into a cool professional mask.

She sighed. "We're being 'spied' on anyway. Chambers hasn't shared anything beyond what would be expected of someone in her role as unofficial shrink. And now we know she's doing it, we can at least keep track of her reports. Which, I might add, is more than I've been able to do for Miranda's."

"Spying on the spy?"

"Pretty much. She can send all the psychological profiles she wants, as long as it doesn't edge over into blackmail material or something."

"But, commander…" he rubbed his beard, uncomfortable at pointing out the obvious flaw in her logic, _"EDI hears everything. She knows we caught Chambers."

"Yeah, I know." Shepard scooted the data-pad out of the way and hitched a hip up on her desk. "Don't you, EDI?"

"Of course, Shepard." EDI's projection shimmered into view in the alcove across from them.

Joker scowled at the ball. "The shit? I thought avoiding her was the whole reason you brought me up here."

Shepard shrugged again. "It's the only place I'm fairly certain isn't bugged. I have Tali check regularly. I don't want any record of the conversation we're about to have except for EDI's own." She turned toward the hologram. "EDI. Did you know Chambers was using the QEC to report to the Illusive Man?"

"I did, Commander."

"Why didn't you tell me?"
"You didn't ask."

He mouthed 'figures' and Shepard rolled her eyes in sympathy.

"Did you know the content of her reports?"

"No, commander. My surveillance data was compromised by the same blocks which Mr. Moreau encountered and removed."

"You're a state-of-the-art cyber-warfare machine and I could get past something you couldn't? Bullshit."

"Incorrect, Mr. Moreau. I merely had no reason to attempt to do so. Ms. Chambers is Cerberus personnel; she could only have been speaking with the Illusive Man. Without a request from Shepard, I had no reason to disable the obstruction." The holograph flickered once. "Your admission of my superiority is noted, however."

"Did I mention that this morning hasn't had enough coffee in it? Really, really not enough coffee."

Shepard ignored them both. "EDI. Are you bound in any way to report what we say here to the Illusive Man? Or anyone, for that matter?"

"Only if I judge that it will negatively impact the chances for mission success, or involve the potential disruption of other Cerberus projects."

"Good."

"Commander Shepard, you have threatened to shank the Illusive Man."

"Exactly. Never hid it. So when I say that everything we're talking about now is for the sake of one mission: stopping the collectors, I hope you believe me that it's true."

"The possibility remains that you are an actor of above-average skill, and have been intentionally misleading as to your personality and motives for the entirety of the mission, Commander."

Shepard's brows furrowed. "Well, fuck. I hadn't thought of that."

EDI continued, "But my observation of your mission preparation yesterday makes that seem unlikely. Given current data, it seems more likely that you are a rather poor actor… outside of a few well-known roles, in any case."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Everyone on this ship's a shrink, now."

"And a critic," Joker added helpfully.

"EDI, the mission we're on is hard enough as it is. I've got a team of type As who can't stand working with others and a boss I can't stand working with, and I am still going to get us through this mission. To do that I have to know what's going on on my own boat, and part of that is hearing what Chambers says to the Illusive Man – without their knowledge. I'm not trying to turn the tables on anyone; I just want the info I need to do the mission. All of it."

"Shepard, with the exception of my inability to retrieve certain Cerberus-related data, I have been
under your command since you took the Normandy. I will record any further usage of the QEC, and will not volunteer that you are aware of it. However, if directly asked by the Illusive Man, I will be compelled to answer." The orb flickered. "It may be of interest to you that the Illusive Man has not directly asked any questions of me since my installation in the Normandy."

"It certainly is of interest to me. Thank you, EDI. You've been very understanding."

It was really rather remarkable. Shepard was using the same forthright determination she used to rally her troops on the computer."Suborning the AI, commander?"

"Shit, Joker, you think I like trying to keep track of all this who-knows-that-I-know-that-they-know that-he-knows shit? We're going to try to do something no one's ever done before, and if we go in like this we'll fall apart. Trust has to start somewhere." Her eyes flicked between him and the AI's projection.

Who knows what EDI's programmed to do behind those blocks? She could be the consummate actor – she's a damn computer, they don't have tells. He stared at the projection in frustration, willing it to give up its secrets."Sorry, commander. I can't trust her." He nodded to indicate EDI.

"But I trust you." He met her gaze and held it. "If you think it'll work, or is the best we can do, then I believe you. And I'll do whatever you need."

The tension left her shoulders and she smiled at him. It was a little smile, but it was more than the one-sided twitch he'd gotten earlier.

Did I say pretty? How about beautiful?

"That's all I could ask." She straightened up. "I won't keep you from your breakfast any longer; I have to get ready for the drop later. Shooting geth from a hover-tank should be a nice antidote to all this espionage."

He pulled himself out of the chair and tossed off a casual salute on his way out the door.

Joker took the Normandy far enough into atmo to drop the hammerhead, then brought her back up to a stable low-orbit. With only a minimal need for occasional course-correction, he kept his eyes on the mission vid-feed… and his attention on Shepard's teasing words. Or at least, he'd been trying to.

There. He had heard something. He whipped his head towards the noise just as Kasumi deactivated her tactical cloak.

"Shit, Goto. Thought Shepard said you weren't supposed to use that thing on the ship."

"She's not here," Kasumi replied cheerfully, and plopped down in the chair next to him.

As if to punctuate her statement, the hammerhead's internal warning klaxon came from Joker's earpiece. He lunged for the volume control and turned it down.

They really needed to have one of the techs look at the alarm system. It was a bit of a hair-trigger, and given Shepard's idiosyncratic driving style, it was triggered a lot. Not that Joker could say for certain that Shepard was driving; she'd disabled her helmet vid, so the inside of the vehicle was a mystery. For all he knew it was Jack at the controls.
Or, heaven forbid, both of them.

Still, the tendency to drive straight at the target, regardless of mountains, ravines, or thresher-nests in the way, did strike him as familiar from his days watching Shepard, Wrex, and Tali in the mako, even if the commander had always claimed that Wrex drove.

When he asked Tali, she said she was sworn to secrecy.

Kasumi gestured at the motion-sickness-inducing footage being relayed from the hammerhead. "I can't believe she prefers this over a classy party." The ground fell away from the hover-tank's cameras as its jets activated. "Joy-riding with Jack on a geth-infested planet."

Joker shrugged. "One step above joy-riding with geth on a Jack-infested planet."

Kasumi giggled. "And how many Jacks does it take to make an infestation?"

"One," he grumbled.

"Aw," she said, "you're so grumpy. D'you know they were smoking down in Jack's lair?"

"Who's 'they'?" He was distracted by the whine of the klaxon again as the tank bumped into an outcropping of rock, skewed around to port, and shot off in the opposite direction.

"Jack and Shep."

He dismissed it as another of Kasumi's flights of fancy. "Shepard doesn't smoke."

"Not cigarettes." She shrugged. "I suppose we all need to relax sometime. So when are you going to relax?"

"Flying a ship here, maybe you noticed."

"Hmph. Only in circles."

"It's called orbit." Kasumi was right, of course – he wasn't actually flying, per se. The only reason he wasn't in the mess with his feet up was that he wanted to be on hand in case he had to swoop to the rescue and scoop up Shepard in the hammerhead.

"Exactly. So, what did you think of Shep's outfit?"

"Is your conversation always this random, or are you having a particularly good day?"

"C'mon. I know you saw her. What did you think?"

Suddenly the port-view from the hammerhead revealed oncoming geth. He barked a warning into the comm and the hover-tank careened around, shot briefly into the air, and came back down square atop its opponent.

The crushed remains of the geth platform receded as the tank sped on its way.

"Well, that's one way to do it," Kasumi remarked dryly.

"Sane people use the guns," he responded, his thumb on the comm-link so Shepard would hear it too.

Shepard mumbled something. Between the lowered volume and the sound of Jack's jubilant
cursing, he couldn't quite make it out… but it sounded a lot like "I meant to use the guns."

"So...?" Kasumi wheedled.

"So what?"

Kasumi would not be deterred. "What did you think of Shep all dressed up?"

"I don't know why you're asking me."

"Oh, really? That's too bad." Kasumi's pouting lips were belied by the gleam in her eyes. "So. What did you think of the dress? You know you want to tell me!"

"Honestly?"

"Obviously!"

"Dress was alright. Heels were awful." He shook his head. "So not her. What were you thinking? Shoulda gone for thigh-high ass-kicking boots. Those she could make work." He paused, glancing quickly at the thief, and added, "Not that I've thought about it."

"With, maybe, 3-inch –"

"No."

"Just testing," Kasumi said cheerfully. "You may be right, though."

There was a thoughtful moment as they both watched the hammerhead soar over an obstacle, power through a geth rocket-trooper, and shoot down a missile platform. "We're headed for Omega after this, right?"

"Yeah," he said distractedly. The klaxon was singing merrily, and the hammerhead had just reversed through a cloud of greasy black smoke which seemed to have come from its own wing. Shepard didn't seem to be concerned, though. "Looking into better armament."

"Fantastic," she said eagerly, "I'm going shopping."

The ground team seemed to have gotten the fire out.

"Would this be shopping-with-actual-credits or your special 'shopping'?" He held up a hand. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

"When angry storekeepers come looking, you never saw me?"

"Exactly."

"Sounds like a plan." Kasumi folded her legs up under her and settled in. "D'you know if the commander ever went by another name?"

"Huh?" That question took him legitimately by surprise. He shrugged. "No idea. None of my business." He thumbed the mic again. Kasumi gestured wildly to stop him, but he ignored her. "Hey, Commander! You have any secret aliases?"

"What? No! Kinda busy here."

A geth rocket trooper erupted in a tour of flame.
"Yeah. Nice driving, by the way."

"Who said I was driving, Joker?"

“Sure, commander.” He released the mic and smirked at Kasumi. "Why, Miss Sneaky-Pants, I think you wanted to find out behind her back!"

"Spoil-sport!" Kasumi swatted at him playfully. "I'm trying to find old holos, but there's almost nothing before all the news shots from the Skyllian Blitz. I thought maybe she went by another name or something."

"What is your fascination with her, exactly?"

He knew damn well what his was. Kasumi's motivation was more of a mystery.

She shrugged lightly. "I'm bored. I haven't been called out much, and as long as Shep's taking us randomly across the known galaxy, I can't really plan anything else. So why not?"

He slapped his forehead lightly. "Obviously! You're bored, so you dig for blackmail material."

"Hey, I never said anything about blackmail!"

"I'm just sayin', I know how I feel about the embarrassing pictures from my childhood, and... I really shouldn't have admitted that, should I?"

"Probably not," she snickered. "But I bet your holos are easy to find. I like a challenge."

On-screen, the hover-tank crashed into another geth platform, sending it flying.

"Uh, commander, you ever think 'hey, what if I'd bothered to learn how to actually drive at some point'? That one thing coulda changed so much."

"No 'what-ifs' on my ship, Moreau! Too late to change the past.” There was brief pause. “And I'm not driving!"

The hammerhead footage spun dizzingly, and revealed a fast-approaching precipice. “Commander! Mountain!"

“No regrets!” Shepard sang happily, and the tank shot over the edge. He could hear Jack cackling in the background.

Joker didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until the tank's inertial dampeners kicked in. He let it out, slowly. Mad-women. He turned to Kasumi for commiseration, but her eyes had vanished behind a projected screen. He couldn't tell if she was delving for the commander's hypothetical baby pictures or lost in memories.

Shepard knit her brows together, staring at the hand-weight she'd liberated from the gym, willing it to move slowly up from the table.

When Samara had found they were headed to Omega, she revealed that her best reports placed her daughter there, and she wanted help bringing her to justice. After that the asari had seemed eager to change the topic of conversation, and she'd graciously demonstrated a handful of techniques for biotic practice.
For all the good it does me. The asari were natural biotics, but in humans the ability was both new and artificial. It required a level of awareness of normally-involuntary systems that was brain-bending, and like most human biotics, Rhi had learned early on how to 'map' a few carefully chosen biotic emanations to precise physical movements, tying it to something simpler for her to call on and understand.

It was useful in combat, but it made relearning new skills and fine-tuning old ones very difficult indeed.

She heard Joker's slightly-uneven footsteps before she saw him and smiled to herself, inordinately happy that he'd sought her out. She'd wanted to find some excuse to continue their conversation this morning, but nothing had come to mind, and keeping your crew from their breakfast unnecessarily was definitely an abuse of command, albeit a minor one. As welcome as the interruption was, though, it didn't relieve her of the task at hand. As Joker sat down and watched in silence, she breathed out, carefully clearing her mind, trying to disassociate thought from body, and then feel for just the nerves that would control movement in her right hand. Ever so slowly she lifted two fingers, trying to feel for the eezo nodes she knew were there.

The weight floated in the air – so did Joker's data pad, her energy drink, and a fork Gardner had apparently forgotten to clean up.

They all settled back to the table with a bump, and she rubbed her temples.

"No potato flakes?" the helmsman asked. Her heart warmed a little, thinking about that evening. He'd made her dinner. And then Kasumi had gone and interrupted. Still, it took some of the sting out of how spectacularly flat her attempt at flirtation had fallen earlier.

"Samara suggested that something solid would be easier to practice on for a biotic idiot." She caught his questioning glance. "Oh, she didn't phrase it like that. I'm translating. To her all humans are biotic idiots."

"What, just because their toddlers have been using them longer than our entire species? That's hardly fair." He picked the fork up, spinning it around in his fingers, then asked awkwardly, "So, what's it feel like? Doing the fancy gravity-n-light show, I mean."

"Y'know, I don't think anyone's ever asked before." She was surprised and pleased at the interest, but when she tried to think of how to explain words vanished. It was hard enough to discuss with other biotics. "It's like… hmph. It's much easier to describe when it's big and kind of explosive," she said thoughtfully. "Also, if it's explosive enough, most people don't wait around to ask for a description."

"Can't imagine why not." He prodded gently, "Is it difficult because we don't have the words for it, or… ?"

"No… maybe." She rubbed her shoulder. "I took a shot in my arm, once, that bruised a nerve. Nothing big, but I couldn't move one pinky one direction for a few weeks. It wasn't like I was trying and nothing was happening; with the nerve out, I couldn't figure out how to try."

"And the physical terrorist kept telling you to try harder anyway, right? Until you wanted to smack them?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're either suddenly telepathic, which is slightly terrifying, or you've been there before." Go with telepathic. I'm thinking about you right now.
"Been there. Foot, though. Bruised in surgery. They keep telling you to do this thing you can't even figure out how attempt, and then suddenly, poof, it works."

"Exactly. Trying to learn biotic skills is a bit like that – you can't even figure out what you're supposed to be doing, and then boom, something explodes. I'm not sure it's just that we don't have the vocabulary – we don't even have the physiology for it. We're trying to make nerves do double-duty." She gestured to the piled objects. "This is a little easier than learning brand new things, but not much. A strong pull in combat is reflexive, now, so…"

"Relearning givens?"

"Yeah." She shrugged sheepishly. "Kinda ridiculous. I'm trying to move something an order of magnitude smaller than what I normally toss around, and it makes my head hurt."

She tried twice more, aware of Joker's green eyes, not on the objects she was lifting, but on her. His face was still, thoughtful.

The weight clunked down again and she leaned forward, resting an arm on the table. As much as she'd like to believe he'd sought her out for companionship, he looked like he had something on his mind.

"Credit for your thoughts?"

"No what-ifs, commander?"

She cocked her head to the side, waiting for him to explain.

There was a note of frustration in his voice. "You really think you can just order people to not wish things had gone differently at some point?"

"I can damn well try." She knew it was a ridiculous thing to say, and she let it show in her voice. Damnit, it's still eating at him. Of course it was. People didn't get over things like that in a day or two; she knew that. But she so desperately wanted to pull him out of the hole he'd dug for himself.

"But…" there were lines of frustration around his mouth, not-quite hidden by his beard.

"I can't help if you won't talk to me." She asked softly, "What's on your mind?"

He looked at the energy drink, at the fork. Anywhere but her. "You can't expect me to believe you don't think about, about if –"

"If?" she prompted.

He looked up suddenly and burst out, "Damn it, Shepard. You died!"

The anger and pain in his outburst rocked her. On the one hand, she welcomed it, like she treasured every time she'd been permitted to see beneath his rather callous shell; on the other… Oh, how she wanted to take that pain away.

Joker had clamped his mouth shut and was staring at the table, almost visibly wanting to take his angry words back.

"If, if, if." She shook her head slowly from side to side, even though she knew he wasn't watching. "If the collectors never found us, if you'd saved the Normandy, if I'd made it into the escape pod, if. If I had a chance to redo it… I don't know that I would."
There. She'd said it. It had taken her awhile to realize it, and it still felt odd, but it was true.

He looked up at her in surprise.

"I know, it sounds wrong." She let out her breath in a frustrated sigh. She'd thought that if anyone could understand, it would be him. *You understood everything else.* "If you had the choice, would you wish you'd been born without Vrolik's?"

She knew it was a risk to ask such an intensely personal question. Except for his initial outburst back on the SR1, he almost never talked about his condition. *The only other times he's talked about his experiences have been to help me.* Only his response would let her know if she'd stepped onto quicksand or safe ground.

Slowly, he shook his head. "No. Cured? Sure. But if I'd never had it, I wouldn't know the man sitting in this chair."

"Exactly." *Oh, thank Ash's god.* He did understand, exactly. She let the relief show in her voice, thanks for once again being willing to bare a private part of his soul, and offered up part of her own. "It hasn't been that long – for me, anyway – but it was too damn big, Jeff."

He looked concerned. Worried for her. She held up a hand to forestall him. "No, no, I'm fine. But… I can't start thinking about what-ifs. It changes too much. We have to deal with now."

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Joker lay in bed, awake, thinking.

He'd wanted to smooth away the worry-wrinkle on her forehead. How foolish was that?

She really didn't blame him. She wasn't looking at him and wondering what it would be like to have been alive for the past two years. She wasn't thinking about that at all.

So maybe, just maybe, he didn't have to feel like a total asshole every time he caught himself watching her out of the corner of his eye. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to admit to himself that he wanted her company, even if he ended up showing far more of himself than he was comfortable with whenever their conversations turned serious. Maybe…

He'd always avoided shipboard relationships like the plague. They were complex enough under normal conditions, with crew-mates watching every word and a tour to serve out in awkward proximity if it went all to hell. That was without the added difficulty of having to work around physical impairments. He'd never wanted to be the subject of scuttlebutt, so he kept himself to himself, and even his imagination firmly in line. It wasn't like he'd been celibate during his service in the navy – he'd been perfectly happy waiting for shore-leave back home on Arcturus. Cute-Katie-in-logistics was too busy for a boyfriend and hated the bar scene; he wasn't looking for a real relationship and disliked having to explain his physical issues to new lovers. Their casual, mutually beneficial arrangement had worked fine for years, until…

*Until you were so upset about losing Shepard you weren't any fun to be around anymore.*

His heart lurched when he thought about the familiar grey spiral into depression, the two years without his ship, without his wings. Without her.

*If I had a chance to redo it, I don't know that I would. Do you wish you'd been born without Vrolik's?*
It wasn't a question he'd expected. *I never thought she'd see that clearly. I should have.* He'd never have thought that his experiences, the struggle to achieve things most people took for granted, could ever benefit someone as brilliantly fit and capable as Shepard. But they had.

*She clung to you in her nightmare. You rocked her when she woke up. She asked you for advice when she was uncomfortable in her own skin.*

But she was drunk when he'd held her; she couldn't have meant to fall asleep on him. And for all he knew, she was also having deep, soul-baring talks with Gardner, Zaeed, and the damn hamster. He'd just known her for longer – *and I have a bigger vocabulary than the hamster. And possibly Gardner.* It didn't necessarily mean anything special.

*Besides, you don't want her because she's broken and needy. You want her to want you even though she's strong.*

He pictured a little paper umbrella, bright lime green against her dark brown hair, and an impish grin. He could make her smile, at least.

*Friendship. That's what this is, and you should appreciate it, damn it.* After what she'd been through, Shepard needed a friend, and he had to admit he did as well.

Still. It was nice to think he didn't have to feel guilty if he imagined something a bit more.

**Chapter End Notes**

The line about the hamster's privacy was gleefully borrowed from Grosse Pointe Blank.
Chapter 23

Shepard stood by Joker's right shoulder, watching the approach to Omega.

During routine sub-FTL space travel, the view was almost static; the scale so vast it gave the illusion that they didn't move at all. It was only watching landing approaches that she could really feel that the ship was moving in a way she could comprehend, really appreciate both the size of the *Normandy* and the skill with which Joker handled her. Threading through the asteroid belt containing Omega was particularly impressive.

She loved to watch him fly.

The pilot himself interrupted her thoughts. “And if you think that's impressive, you should see me make her bank in a vacuum!”

Shepard snorted. “Joker, I may be *almost* as ignorant as you think I am, but even I know there's no reason to make a ship bank in vacuum.”

“Aww! Why can't we fly like in the movies?” His fingers danced over the controls as the space station came into view.

It was true. Decades after space flight was an accepted norm, the vid portrayal still tended towards the romantic. The old ones were even worse, though... *hey, that's an idea.*

Both Kelly Chambers and Joker, of all people, had recently approached her about Kasumi. The thief was spending far too much time plugged into her dead partner's grey-box, lost in memories. Shepard had already asked Thane to speak with her – if anyone knew about the danger of becoming trapped in the past, it was the drell – but she suspected a more social approach might work better.

“That's a good idea. Movie tonight?”

Joker looked up at her, too briefly for her to read his look. “Um –“

“Something social might draw Kasumi out a bit,” Rhi confided, “especially if we claim her quarters for the event.”

“Oh! Right. Good idea, commander.”

She nodded, her mind already jumping ahead to Omega, and turned aft to go suit up.

–––

The light in afterlife was dim, moody and flickering. The club was filled with an insidiously suggestive beat and more overtly suggestive asari dancers.

It was a bit disconcerting for someone coming straight from ship's morning and a cup of coffee.

Shepard shook her head once, realigning herself to the station's early-evening time, and strode briskly through the revelers to the platform aerie of Aria T'loak, pirate queen of Omega. As she climbed the stairs she slowed her pace, matching the air of unconcerned cool radiated by the asari seated on the leather couch. At Aria's gestured invitation, she sauntered to the seat across from her, sprawled back into the couch and put her foot up on her knee.

“What do you need with Omega, Shepard?”
“A gun. Your arms dealers have been... less than forthcoming. Apparently they get a bit anxious when a Spectre starts asking for things that aren't legal in Citadel space.” She shook her head sadly. “I'd have thought they'd be bolder than that.”

Aria shot her a look that said ‘don’t make me play games’. “You can get guns anywhere, Shepard.”

“Not one this big.”

Aria was not impressed. “What species are you outfitting? A krogan?”

The corner of Rhi's mouth twitched up. “A frigate.”

“Ah.” The asari was unimpressed. “And for some reason you think I'll help you.”

Rhi didn't let it worry her. She relaxed back, deeper into the swank cushions, and explained as if she was talking about the weather. “The collectors have already struck Omega. It didn’t touch you, but that plague was bad for business. Things like that upset balances. The plague was only a shot across the bows. They're right on your doorstep,” she continued matter-of-factly, “And I'm going to take them out.”

“With a gun that’s illegal for non-military use in Citadel space?”

“Do I look like a give a shit?” Shepard raised one eyebrow. “I’m not looking for gifts because you love me, Aria. The dealer'll get paid, in credits... and in coordinates for untapped and unclaimed local mineral resources, which I just happened to have stumbled across.” *Who'd have thought that all the time Hotchkins spent chucking probes at unsuspecting planets was going to pay off? She's in danger of losing her title as Most Useless Person on the Normandy. Or she would be if there was anyone else to give it to.*

“How many?”

“Five sites,” she said, “Which leaves three for whomever brokers the deal.”

Aria's lip twisted. Shepard knew she didn't usually stoop to haggling, but she also knew that an operation the size of Omega needed raw resources more than anyone ever realized.

“Reverse that, and I'll see what I can do.”

“No skin off my ass.” Rhi's eyes flicked sideways to where Samara stood with Garrus. “And one other thing...” She explained about the hunt for the ardat yakshi, the asari Samara chased who used her genetic defect to become a serial killer.

This time Aria's disgust was genuine, and deep. Of course, she hadn't bothered to hunt the murderer herself. “But you're welcome to take care of the monster. Best start at her last victim's apartment. Tenements. Anto'll give you the address. Good luck finding her.”

Shepard nodded and stood to take her leave.

“And better luck catching her,” Aria added. “I’ll have someone see about your armament. You’ll have your gun... if you survive the ardat yakshi.”

T'loak settled back into her seat, eying a data pad from her lieutenant. She was ignoring her departing supplicant, as expected... so Rhi was surprised when Aria called out “You should find a young man to keep you warm, Shepard,” as she was descending the stairs.
She’d have pretended she hadn’t heard, but Garrus was too amused to let it slide. “Romantic advice from the pirate queen of Omega. That’s not something I thought I’d hear.”

Rhi very much doubted that Aria’s comment should be filed under ‘romantic’ advice. She was fairly certain the asari’s ideas were constrained to the purely physical. Perhaps ‘stress maintenance’, at best – and that was something she was perfectly capable of dealing with on her own, thank you. She was a big girl, and there’d been a lot of long tours since the day on Elysium when she declared that she wasn’t going to be casually screwing any more team-mates.

(The startled batarian she’d announced it to had taken her vow to his grave. It had been 30 hours since the invasion force set down, and fatigue and stress had been affecting her in odd ways).

“I’m honored, I’m sure,” she told Garrus dryly. “Let’s get out to the tenements. We have an ardat yakshi to track.”

Joker tapped out a rhythm on the arm of his chair. Sure, Shepard had found a bunch of old heavy rock and metal in his files, but that was because he was a bit compulsive about hanging onto things like that. He hadn’t really been into it since his angsty teen years. Lately he’d been much more interested in jazz.

He stopped abruptly when he heard the airlock decon start to cycle, and swung his feet down off EDI’s projector rail.

The shore party stepped out into the cockpit, continuing a conversation they’d clearly been having for some time. Joker started to regret his lack of attention.

Garrus was fluming. “I want to see anyone who kills innocents like that dead, Shepard, but this is ridiculous. There has to be another way.”

It was Samara, not Shepard, who responded. “Morinth is canny. If we try your way, she’ll be gone before you realize she's there.”

“You want to use Shepard as bait.”

*She what?* “Whoa, Commander. Listen to my turian friend, here.” Joker shared a quick, concerned glance with Garrus.

Shepard’s voice was like cool water on the smoldering argument, injecting a breath of calm and reason. “Samara. How can you be so sure that I’ll draw her out?”

The asari started to wax poetic about creativity and sparks. The commander waited patiently until she reached her point: “Shepard, you’re an artist on the battlefield.”

*An artist on the battlefield? The justicar should really stay away from poetry – especially if she wants to convince Shepard.* “Think, Commander! Thirty years ago, you’d only have been able to work in red, but thanks to interstellar travel, a whole blood-palette is available for your artistic expression!”

Turian, asari, and human were all staring at him, in various stages of surprise, disgust, and amusement.

“Sorry, was that crass?” He turned to EDI. “I think that was crass.”
Shepard held her hand up, two fingers making the gesture for 'just a little', the tiniest twitch of one lip conveying a world of exasperated amusement before her face became completely business-like again.

“Garrus. I appreciate the concern, but Samara's been hunting Morinth for decades. If she believes that this is the most promising course of action, we'll try it.” She held up a hand to forestall his response. “Do I have to say it again? Morinth kills with sex. I'm not going to fuck her.”

Garrus settled with bad grace. Joker caught his eyes briefly. *We'll work something out.*

“Now, Morinth's supposed to be a night-owl, and it's still early evening, station-time. We've got a few hours to kill if I'm going to be fashionably late.” She raised one eyebrow, inviting them to share the joke of her being fashionable in any way at all. “I'll be talking with Samara if anyone needs me.”

As she walked away, he heard her mutter “Damn. I suppose this means the dress again, doesn't it?”

Shepard's cool look quelled any commentary, but she still drew every eye in the CIC as soon as she stepped out of the elevator. Joker watched her surreptitiously on the bridge vid-feed.

*If I turn around my eyes will fall out of my head. And that'd probably be my least embarrassing reaction.*

In retrospect, he really shouldn't have suggested the boots. He'd been having enough trouble keeping Shepard out of his thoughts lately, and he was pretty sure those would make an appearance in his dreams tonight.

He'd tried to get Kasumi to work with him on a contingency plan, but as soon as Kasumi had heard that Shepard was going to dress up again, she'd blurted that she had to hurry and dashed for the airlock. She'd come back less than an hour ago and gone straight to Shepard.

Kasumi had done something with the dress, too. It was *shorter.*

Shepard was... was... his vocabulary seemed to have deserted him. The CIC cameras were giving him an eye-full, and his brain was too busy with the vision of long black boots, long brown thighs, and a very short black dress to leave him any thought for words. And when he said his *brain* was busy, he meant, well –

The commander's footsteps grew louder as she approached the airlock where Samara waited.

The asari barred her way. “No weapons, commander. None.”

Shepard growled at her, arms crossed beneath her breasts, hip cocked in a way that made every curve on her muscled frame stand out.

*Oh god, that is not helping.*

“You really think she'd be able to tell?” Shepard demanded.

“I could.”

She grumbled, “You just know I'm always packing,” but she reached down and pulled a small pistol from underneath her dress, incidentally revealing the black straps of a thigh holster, and slapped it angrily into Samara's hand.
For a moment, all he could think of was the contrast of hard gunmetal, smooth leather, and soft inner thigh. *Really, really not helping. Think about your grandmother.* He gritted his teeth.

Shepard shot him a look as she stalked into the airlock. He didn't turn his head as he yelled after her. “Knock 'em dead, Commander!”

After that, it was time work.

Tali appeared on the deck as soon as Samara and Shepard had cycled through, running past the CIC to meet him at the bridge, omnitool on and busy.

“I can't believe she's actually going through with this. Did you have any luck with the club?”

“Me neither.” He shook his head. “EDI's been able to get to their security networks, or one of 'em, but we've only got visual.” He pulled up the hacked feeds, grainy vid of the afterlife VIP area. “It's real old school. Can't re-aim the cameras. Just have to collate four feeds at once.”

“I'm on audio.” Tali tapped away. “I wasn't able to get the bug in place 'till just before she got dressed. I'm still looking for a channel through Omega's chatter... there. Got it.” She sent the channel data.

“Garrus? You in position?”

The turian's voice clattered over the com. “Yeah, but that place is buttoned up tight. I can't get in short of shooting the door guard.”

“Samara didn't think Morinth would try anything at the club.” Tali didn't sound convinced.

“From the evidence I heard, I agree, actually,” Garrus assured.

Joker cursed. “Yeah, and that'd be fine if we knew where the blue bitch laired, but we don't. I've had EDI looking for intel, but Morinth is good at hiding.”

The blue sphere next to them pulsed. “A surprisingly large amount of business on Omega appears to be cash-in-hand or in exchange for... services rendered. It is a very effective means of hiding information.”

“We know you don't know, EDI, thanks, that's very helpful. Thane, are you there?”

The drell's deep voice thrummed in his ear. “Yes. I can see the club entrance from my position, and am prepared to follow. Once I have located our quarry I will instruct Garrus so that he may find a vantage for fire.”

“Good. They're headed your way now. Remember, there's a chance it all goes off exactly as Samara planned, and if that happens we were all playing skyllian five, okay?”

“Roger that,” Garrus said, “I lost six hundred to Tali and her damn Quarian poker face.”

After a few minutes of radio silence, Joker's earpiece *thrummed*, filling his skull with a strange deep reverberation. He exchanged a confused glance with Tali, sitting in the co-pilot's chair. “What the hell was that?”


Joker met the lights of Tali's eyes again, just as they heard Garrus whistle. A turian whistle wasn't like a human whistle, exactly, but it conveyed the general idea.
“Let me guess, the commander just passed you?”

“Er, yeah.”

Joker shoved his fist into his mouth to stop his entirely inappropriate laughter. You're not exactly in a position to judge, man. Tali’s strangled sounds suggested she was suppressing mirth, too.

“I can't blame ’em.” He shrugged and grinned sheepishly at her. “Did you see those boots?”

She nodded, a giggle escaping. “When I planted the bug. Eeee, I shouldn't laugh, but I'm nervous.”

“You and me both.” He reached over and patted her suited arm, and she brushed his fingers in thanks.

“It's awful, sitting here and not being able to do anything.”

Welcome to my world.

“It's one thing being shot at, but this 'ardat-yakshi',” the quarian shuddered, “it's so horrible.”

He nodded agreement, and then Tali's bug started to work. For a moment he hoped Shepard wouldn't be able to get into the club – oh well, too bad, have to leave chasing the asari mind-rapist for another day – but there was no such luck. They'd just have to hope their safe-guards were enough. Or maybe Morinth's home with a head-ache.

“Oh, keelah, what is she doing?”

Joker shrugged helplessly. Shepard seemed to be deliberately insulting two turians. Nothing to worry about under normal circumstances, but they were armed and armored, and she... well, they were really amazing boots, but that wouldn't help much in a fight. His eyes were glued to the security footage.

One of the turians was approaching her, getting in her space. She was tall, but he towered over her.

Shepard stood her ground, waiting, until he shoved her on the shoulder, then used his arm and proximity to throw him to the floor. His friend apparently wasn't a quick learner, because he tried the same thing, and ended up in the same spot.

Joker whistled. “Owned by a human in a dress. Eat that, bastards.”

Tali swatted at his arm, and then they both settled in to wait.

Rhi looked at the asari across the table from her, blue eyes animated, hands weaving gracefully to punctuate her statements, and tried to see the dangerous beauty that Samara had warned her of.

Luring Morinth further into conversation had turned out to be almost too easy. The asari only wanted to hear her own preferences confirmed; Shepard just had to nudge the topic in the direction of one of her interests and Morinth would pontificate. At length. It was lucky; Rhi had never been great at outright lies. If she'd had to say she loved Expel 10, the game would have been up in a moment. As far as she was concerned, any band that required sensory stimulation or drugs for 'full appreciation' was making up for a sad lack in the music department. Lies of omission, though... of those, she was a master.

She swirled the drink in her glass and leaned back in the booth, stretching her legs. The most
difficult part of the plan so far had been avoiding the alcohol in her glass. It was easy to keep her gaze on Morinth as if enraptured. Morinth was the most dangerous person in the room.

*Except, perhaps, for me.* No, better trust Samara on that one. Without a gun, it was hand-to-hand and biotics, and the asari would squash her flat.

“...find myself drawn to dark, dangerous places...”

*Places where you won't get caught,* Shepard thought. Samara had warned her about falling under Morinth's spell; the greater danger was betraying how disgusted she was. Leaving aside the fact that mono-gendered though asari may be, they had always appeared far too *female* for Rhi's taste, Morinth was rapidly on her way to being one of the least attractive people she'd ever met, just based on conversation alone. *I bet you seek out danger. Just enough danger that you feel powerful for coming out on top. Just enough violence that you can kill without getting your pretty blue hands dirty.*

Morinth sought out violence for the thrill of it. Shepard lived it because it was important. In the Reds they'd known how to deal with preppy kids who slummed for shits and giggles; they chewed them up and spat them out.

Her impression of the ardat yakshi as a thrill-seeker made her easier to play. She took the offensive, casting herself as the hunter, the powerful one who'd pursued the beautiful asari, and Morinth ate it up like candy. *She can't wait to turn the tables on me and reveal herself.*

True enough, the ardat yakshi invited her back to her apartment in almost record-time – and Shepard had cruised enough bars for a bit of no-strings fun back in the day that she'd set a few records herself. Her place was close. *Good. Samara should have no trouble following.* Shepard examined the décor while Morinth sat, smug and certain that her prey would come to her.

Sitting on the couch was the hardest thing Shepard had done all day.

Rhi couldn't keep from shuddering as Morinth reached a hand around the back of her neck, long blue fingers brushing over the exposed metal of the biotic amp at the back of her skull. Luckily the asari seemed to think it was desire, not revulsion. If she wrenched the amp out, Shepard would be even more unarmed than she already was, and beyond that... it was just too intimate.

She couldn't hide the tension in her muscles, either. She knew Morinth could feel that her languidness was all an act. *Where is Samara?!!*

...—

“What's going on out there?” Joker barked. “They're way too close to going through with this, get your asses in gear!”

“Random riffraff intercepted Samara,” Garrus reported. “I don't have a clear shot. Thane!”

“On it.” They heard the drell's murmured prayer as he disposed of the impediment, followed by Samara's outraged “What are you doing here?”

“No time. Go!” The drell commanded.

...—

The asari's eyes were black as the depths of space, and Rhi was falling into them, just like she'd fallen over Alchera. Helpless. Alone.
How odd that she could be inches from another, and feel so alone.

Morinth's words whispered over her mind like oil over water, eel-quick and as slippery. This is what you want, they said. Someone to match your deadliness. Someone to show you risks even you haven't tried. Remember the first time you tasted violence? You'll always need more, now, to get that same thrill. And I can give it to you. Decadence and drugs and depravity.

The oil spread out, coating her mind, slowing her thoughts.

But it couldn't mix with the water. Rhi's mind was fogged, but certain. That isn't what I want. None of that is. She enjoyed her job. She enjoyed the violence. But it wasn't what she craved.

“Surprise,” she murmured, breaking the meld, and Samara burst through the door.

Shepard took a quick shower and changed into a clean shipsuit. She'd resisted the urge to have a longer one, to give in to the feeling that Morinth's mind and fingers were still touching her and needed to be cleaned off. The ardat-yakshi was dead, and Shepard was not going to let her have that much power.

No, it was a normal mission, a normal day, and she'd spend a normal evening with her crew.

She grabbed a bite to eat and went to the observation deck. It was packed with off-duty crew.

She stepped over the back of the couch, her foot planted firmly in the space between Kelly and Joker, and shot Chambers a Look. The yeoman obligingly scooted over to make room for her, and Shepard slid down to sit between them. Kasumi tossed her a bottle. It turned out to be not bad root-beer, at least, not bad after she got over expecting it to be beer-beer.

The show was in full swing, and looked even worse than anything she remembered. She's asked Kelly to pick an old sci-fi flic, on the theory that whatever their taste in drama, there'd be something any spacer crew could laugh at. This thing was older than old, though.

"What is this, Kelly, Short Skirts in Space?"

Donnelly piped up, "Hey, Commander, that'd help my productivity!"

"Absolutely not."

Beside her, Joker heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks. I did not want to see Donnelly's hairy legs in a mini skirt."

Rhi chuckled. She hadn't thought of twisting it that way.

Ken was a good sport; he puffed up indignantly. "I could rock that dress, Moreau!"

Gabby shook her head. "Better you than me, Kenneth."

The vid closed with an obviously-choreographed fist-fight and a swell of dramatic music.

Garrus had been watching from the corner. “That is... interesting. I had no idea that humanity's earliest dreams of space flight involved so much, er...”

“Seducing alien women?” supplied Kasumi. “We're a... lively... species.”
Joker added “By which she means ’horny as –’”

“As fuck,” Shepard supplied helpfully.

"Ah. Speaking of which, been meaning to ask. Commander, saw you received anatomical charts I sent; turian, drell. Hope data was sufficient. Have more data on... technique, should it be required.”

Suddenly everyone was staring at Shepard as she stared, open mouthed, at Mordin.

“Solus. What the hell are you talking about?”

He blinked rapidly. “May have misinterpreted. Understandable error. Please forget ever said anything.”

“You thought –“ She covered her eyes so she didn't have to look at Garrus. Thankfully Thane hadn't joined the party. “Mordin. I know how to fight dirty against a human opponent. I needed to brush up on other species.”

Salarian and turian continued to stare at her.

“It came in handy today, too. Set a turian right on his metallic ass.” She glanced at Garrus, “Sorry.”

Garrus backed a step away. “Somehow, I'm quite glad I'm wearing armor.”

Jacob guffawed. “Swell, Vakarian. Now you know how human males feel around her all the time.”

“As a very lenient and generous commander, I'll pretend I didn't hear that,” she said quietly. Mordin had offered to send her vids on 'technique'... oh, sweet fucking hell. It was all she could do not to laugh.

Kelly, ever the social smoother, interrupted. “Anyone up for another show?”

Rhi glanced at Joker surreptitiously, wanting to see how he responded before she agreed. Having secured an unexpectedly advantageous position, she realized that the whole movie-thing would lose a lot of its charm without the tantalizing warmth of her pilot's leg against hers where the close quarters made them touch.

To her relief he just shrugged. “I'm game if anyone else is. Can we watch something a little more recent this time?”

“Oh, of course!” Kelly jumped up. “I think you might actually like this one, Joker.”

Kelly had been right; the second show she picked was a lot less ridiculous. He'd have watched anything, though, just for the chance to enjoy having Shepard in such comfortable, casual proximity. She'd even joined in the cheering when the (Hawaiian-shirt-wearing, scruffy) pilot executed the day-saving maneuver, and Chambers had grinned. “Fun stuff, isn’t it?”

Shepard had shrugged. “Eh, apparently I’m just partial to pilots.”

She hadn’t been looking at him, but their legs had been touching, and she grinned his direction when she left for her quarters. It was a tiny thing, but it sent shivers of hope through him, and there was a smile on his face as he crawled into his rack. He wasn't even irritated at the chatter in crew quarters.
Matthews was talking in an embarrassingly dreamy fashion about some girl he’d dated, or tried to date, or perhaps gazed on from afar with binoculars – something like that, anyway. Matthews wasn’t a bad guy in general, but Joker was convinced he was one of those poor assholes who kept books of 39 Pick-Up Lines that are Sure To Work! in his recently-viewed list. Matthews had once proudly informed them that his favorite was to ask a girl’s favorite food, so he could immediately invite her to a dinner she couldn’t refuse. Joker had been wrestling with how to explain the myriad ways in which that was creepy when Gabby had smacked the navigator upside the head, which was probably more effective, anyway.

Donnelly grunted. “Look, kid, if the commander gives us liberty we’ll take ye to a bar and get ye properly soused. I guarantee, ye’ll see the whole world different after I introduce you to a few asari friends o’ mine.”

“Really?!”

“Absolutely,” Donnelly assured, “after an evening of getting rejections from them, ye wouldn’t have anything to get nervous about anymore an’ ye could go back to actin’ like a regular human being.”

Gabby normally prided herself on keeping out of the chatter, but that she couldn’t pass up. “You have a lot of experience with rejections, don’t you, Ken?”

“Oh aye,” the engineer replied, happy to be the butt of his own joke, “Last one was a beauty. Bit before I said shove-off to the Alliance, I had to get some equipment out of hock, and I met this lovely paper-pusher who kept asking me to sign everything in triplicate.” He sighed dreamily, aping Matthews. “Short-and-curvy, name of Katy.”

Joker stopped halfway through pulling off his uniform top. Well, ain’t that a coincidence.

“Anyhow, she said she already had one shore-leave trouble-maker and she didn't need another.” He sighed, wistfully, then added "Never even got her to admit what her favorite food was," as a jab at Matthews.

Joker yawned. "Sushi."

"What?"

"Works in Arcturus logistics, curly hair, about 5' 3''? Sushi."

"You're kidding," the engineer laughed, "You?!"

The word hit him like a slap, full of unspoken implications. He should have kept his mouth shut. "Apparently I'm a troublemaker."

"I can't believe it," Matthews said. There was laughter in his voice, too.

Joker bristled. “Small universe, Matthews. Arcturus is a big station, but it’s not that big.”

“Well, yeah, but you –“ the navigator seemed to think about what he was saying for the first time and choked on his words, “– knew the same people. That’s hard to believe.”

And there it was.

But you’re a cripple. That’s what you were thinking, damnit.
The conversation moved on, but Joker ignored it, his earlier excitement turning to ashes.

*Oh, of course, Joker, he just flies and stays to himself, of course he can't date, he's breakable...*

He curled around his own anger and frustration, trying to swallow his impotent rage – at Matthews and his easy, incorrect assumptions, and all the people like him; and at himself, for allowing that brief, tantalizing moment of delusion, of dreaming that maybe this time it'd be different and he'd have a chance. He normally didn't entertain such optimism; it made the inevitable fall too hard.

And it was inevitable; he knew that.

First impressions were dangerous. It wasn't a coincidence that most of the girls he'd gone out with he'd first met while he was sitting down, looking entirely *normal*. Deciding when and how to reveal his condition was a balancing act he was constantly aware of. He'd blown any chance he had to make a good first impression on Shepard more than two years ago, before he knew she liked to get to know her crew without reading their files first, that she hadn't even known about the damn disease. Certainly before he'd ever considered her as more than a commanding officer.

He squeezed his eyes shut in the darkness, trying to swallow back the bile. So most people wrote him off. Not everyone did. *And you never had a chance with Shepard, anyway. So what? You are not an angsty teenager. You take what life hands you and you fucking deal with it. There are collectors and reapers out there, and your baggage is not important.* He shouldn't whine. He was talented, he was doing the job he'd always wanted to do, he was more mobile than he'd ever been – Shit, he was alive. Seventy-five or even fifty years ago, he might not have survived childhood. There were people who faced more limitations than him every day.

Somehow, reminding himself that the galaxy was full of people worse off was never actually uplifting. It just made the whole world seem like a darker place.

*Shit.*

The conversation had died out around him, replaced by snores and slow, steady breathing, but Joker lay awake late into ship's night, hating genetics, hating himself, and hating everyone in the room.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Joker winced as he stretched his right knee. The joint had always been sloppy – loose ligaments were a common symptom of Vrolik’s – and it had been worse than usual for the past week. He hadn't changed his routine, but he'd pretty much given up on trying to find a rhyme or reason for the times his body randomly crapped out on him. At least for little things like this.

He did know what would help, and unfortunately it wasn't anything as quick as a miracle-shot from doctor Chakwas, so he was back in the gym, this time with ankle weights, trying to beef up his leg muscles so they'd do the job the ACL seemed to be sucking at.

He sat there doing leg-lifts, which had to be the most boring exercise in existence, and cursed the Illusive Man and his budget priorities. Anyone who could afford to put a fish tank in the captain's cabin could have put a therapy pool in too, right? At least that was practical. Sort of. Compared to a fish tank.

You got to splash people. That part was kinda fun.

He finished another set, scowled at his legs, and used his omnitool to reset the music in his earpiece. He thought he'd outgrown the need for venting through angry metal, but sometimes it still seemed to be the only thing that fit his mood. Damn Matthews, damn Donnelly. Damn their assumptions.

The music sounded too tinny through an earpiece. He pulled up the mids, and the over-all volume, and then had to bump it down again or kill his ears. How did Shepard stand it that loud?

*Don't think about Shepard.*

She had trouble getting the crew to work together. He had to take his limbs to task. *Shit.*

He was still in a crappy mood when he got back to the crew quarters, and tired, to boot.

"Joker, m'man." Donnelly looked up from digging through his locker. "We're going for drinks! Are ye game?"

He hadn't heard the announcement. "We have Liberty?"

"As long as we hold hands with our travel-buddies," Matthews quipped.

"What?"

"Weell, the commander said we could go out t' play if we were very, very good wee bairns, stayed close to our friends, and didn't copy the big kids."

"Why do I think she didn't use those exact words?"

Matthews grinned. "Exact words, and I quote, 'This is Omega. No one will think twice about pulling your windpipe out through your ass. Be safe and sensible. Stay in groups of three or more at all times, and don't expect me to pick your teeth off the floor if you get in a brawl.'"

*That sounds more like Shepard.* Joker scowled. They'd probably only asked him because they
needed a third person to get past the airlock. Matthews had been the idiot who’d pissed him off last night, anyway. Him and Donnelly.

Gabby stuck her head around the corner. "You forgot the 'have fun, kids.' Kenneth, are you still getting ready? You take forever."

Okay. Not the third person. Joker felt a bit guilty for leaping to conclusions, but he still wasn't sure he was up for the whole buddy act. On the other hand… it'd be good to get off the ship for a while. Clear my head.

The Normandy was his. But she was also Shepard's.

If she'd just leave him alone for a few days in a row, he could get his shell back up and stop thinking about her before she drove him insane. The old Shepard wasn't this callous, he thought. I wonder if she has any clue what she's doing to me. He was thinking about her at night, unable to sleep, that old ache of unrequited desire. He'd gotten closer to her because she needed a friend, and now he couldn't handle being one. Not if it kept appearing as just enough flirtation to remind him that she was a beautiful, athletic woman and he was the safe buddy who wasn't near her league.

Shit, I'm not even in the same cluster. She'd consider an alien before she considered me.

Most people would.

Definitely time to get off the ship. If you're going to wallow, do it into a pint. It's traditional. And he wouldn't be any more pleased with them if Matthews came back cheerful drunk after he'd spent a dismal afternoon on the ship. Might as well get drunk together.

"Yeah, I suppose I can stand you lot for an hour or two." He pulled his carefully-stowed civvies out of his locker. No way was he going to walk around an alien station wearing a sign that said 'Shoot me! I'm Cerberus!' His cap, at least, didn't have a logo – just the bold SR2. That was a mark he wore with pride.

Donnelly tossed one wrinkled shirt onto his bunk and pulled out another.

"Ken!" Gabby complained. "Just pick one."

"I dinna understand how they all get like this."

Joker eyed the jumbled locker around Donnelly's shoulder. "Mystery of the universe," he said dryly.

"Aye," the engineer responded sadly. "Nothing for it, then." He pulled on a Hawaiian-print shirt in colors that threatened to make Joker's eyes bleed. "Let's go get lit!"

"Safe and sensible, she said," Gabby muttered. "Don't start any brawls, she said. Good thing I'm along, that's all I have to say."

They headed up to find the airlock, a bar, and a drink.

To everyone's surprise (and Matthews' intense disappointment), they ended up at the one bar on Omega that didn't feature nearly-nude asari dancers at all hours of the day. It was quieter than Afterlife, and far enough from the Normandy's berth that Joker wasn't looking forward to the long walk back. Still, it was good to get off the ship.

Donnelly cheerfully offered to pay for the first round of drinks, and the day started to look a bit
"So. The Ardat Yakshi is dead." Aria stared at Shepard, evaluating. "And you didn't destroy any of my station in the process."

Shepard just stopped herself from rolling her eyes. "Please."

The asari gestured to her ever-present body-guard. "Drinks, Anto." She glanced at Shepard. "What will you have?"

"Water."

"Please." Aria aped her tone perfectly.

The batarian came back with two glasses of something amber.

Shepard raised her glass casually in Aria's a direction, interpretable as anything from a toast to a thanks-for-the-drink, and sipped. Carefully. *I can't not,* she reasoned. She had no idea what had prompted the sudden hospitality. By all appearances, Aria really was just that glad to be rid of the Ardat Yakshi, but for all she knew, T'loak was probing for weakness, or considering an alliance. Or a betrayal.

Joker had already been tired from the workout and the walk there, and the walk back seemed interminable. He lagged, one hand on the corridor wall for support. The other three were chatting and didn't seem to notice as he fell farther and farther behind.

They were walking through one of Omega's low-rent commercial districts. A hodge-podge of vendors had made use of every available space. Any alcove that didn't have a small shop tucked into it was piled high with locked-and-tagged cargo. The place would have been dismal if it was rush hour. With most of the shops closed off with metal and plastic sheeting, it was even worse.

Joker lifted his hand from the wall to avoid a patch of something nasty, and paused, willing his legs not to quiver. *Every time you do this you get stronger. Come on.* Everything hurt. If he'd still had crutches he'd have used them gladly, just to give his legs a bit of a break. *If you were better about your workout schedule, you'd be through this stage by now. Man up.*

"Hey, guys," Gabby's voice from far ahead, "Wait a minute."

Joker glanced up and saw her looking back at him. He started to lift a hand to wave off her concern, then reminded himself not to be an ass. *Thirty years of dealing with this, and accepting help when I need it is still the hardest part.* He offered her a weak smile instead.

"Wasn't there a place back there a bit with some cabs?" Gabby continued, "Let's go back and get a taxi." She started to walk back towards him, one hand on Matthews' arm. Donnelly turned to follow them, a few steps behind.

And then the hall behind Donnelly exploded.

In Aria's aerie, Shepard felt a rumble through the soles of her boots.
"Commander," EDI's voice in her earpiece cut through the sound of Aria demanding an explanation from Anto, "There has been a small explosion on the station. Crew members Daniels, Donnelly, Matthews and Moreau were –"

Shepard stepped on the couch and vaulted to the floor below. She was running before EDI finished her sentence.

—

The noise was so loud that it didn't even register as sound.

The ground shook, toppling him from his feet. Joker reflexively put out his hand as he fell, only to feel a hot throb of pain as his fingers met the wall. He snatched his hand back, slid down the wall, and landed on his ass.

Joker cradled his right hand to his chest and rolled over onto his belly.

Gabby and Matthews were ahead of him, sprawled on the floor. Beyond them Donnelly's Hawaiian shirt almost glowed in the dimness. Beyond him…

A man was pulling a gun, advancing on Donnelly's prone form.

In the silence following the explosion, he imagined Shepard's voice, barking instruction to Matthews. *If you ever need to use a gun, aim for the biggest target.* She’d thumped herself on the sternum to emphasize the point. *No fancy shooting.*

Joker awkwardly pulled the pistol from its holster with his left hand. He couldn't hold it in his right; too many fingers were broken. *I only need the trigger finger.*

He had one shot. The man only had eyes for Donnelly. *One shot. After that, he'll be paying attention to me.*

Time slowed. There was nothing but him, the gun, and the man walking towards Donnelly.

*Center of the torso. Biggest target.*

He took a deep breath, let it out, and fired.

The assassin's mouth opened in a soundless 'oh'. His hands went to his belly, and a patch of red bloomed around his splayed fingers.

He staggered backwards into the darkness and was gone from sight.

Wary of other gunmen, Joker crawled to where the others were. Even using the heel of his hand, every step sent pain through his broken fingers, but the shock made it distant. He was disconnected, emotionless. Doing what he had to do.

Matthews was curled in a fetal position, blood running down his face. *Has he been screaming the whole time?* Joker's hearing was only just coming back, and the sound was weird and distant, an ache in his ear-drums. Daniels had crawled to her partner and hunched over him, eyes wide. Ken Donnelly had been closest to the explosion. He lay on his stomach, not responding to Gabby's cries.

Daniels. Matthews. Donnelly. And Donnelly wasn't moving.

*Help the ones you know you can help. Then they can help you. Gabby must be mobile. She got to*
Donnelly. We're too spread out. Have to get Matthews moving and over to the others.

He reached for Donnelly's neck, found the pulse. It was fluttering, but there.

"Daniels!" He fell back on Alliance last-name protocol, hoping it would help jar her out of her fugue. "Daniels, look at me. Where are you hurt?"

She turned to him, expression vacant, tears running down her cheeks, and shook her head.

"Gabby. Can you hold a gun?"

She nodded, once, and he thrust his pistol into her hand, turning her by the shoulder in the direction their assailant had gone. "Watch that way. That's how you help Ken, okay?" Then he crawled back to the fallen navigator.

Matthew's side was peppered with shrapnel, myriad tiny injuries glistening like bloody confetti. His body must have kept Gabby from the worst of it; he'd been between her and the blast. The blood on his face was from a scalp graze; Joker was more worried about whatever wound he'd curled around.

He pulled off his over-shirt, hissing as the cuff bumped his fingers, and used it to apply pressure to the scalp injury. "Matthews. Look up. You're fine. I need you to let me look at you. Take a deep breath…"

Omega was an unpredictable mix of solid mining structure, cut-rate industrial pre-fab, and thrown-together salvage. The farther away from Aria's seat of power the more things looked to be held together with duct tape and bubblegum. Shepard's boots rang on solid, stable decking with every stride, but as she neared the scene flung dust and debris made it clear the walls hadn't been constructed so carefully.

Shepard tore around the corner, pistol in one hand, the other reaching for extra medigel.

The area was a mess. The floor was okay, but the wall plating had buckled and torn and panels had fallen from the ceiling. She dodged around broken cargo crates, stepping on shards of metal. Farther down the corridor, a gleam of bright white caught her eye.

Lying on the floor was a black-and-white cap.

Oh, no. No no no no no. Beyond her trained detachment, her heart lurched, but her feet kept moving.

A shot ricocheted off the crate she'd just passed, and she ducked. It had come from in front of her, where a pile of rubble partially blocked the hallway. She dropped into a crouch and raised her pistol just as she heard a wonderfully familiar voice yell, "Daniels, stand down! It's Shepard!"

Her heart leapt. Joker! Joker was alive and giving orders. Shepard added her own voice to his. "Put down your weapon, Daniels," she said, and walked around the corner.

Daniels, Matthews, and Moreau were huddled around Donnelly's unmoving figure. Matthews had a make-shift bandage tied around his head. Joker's face was bloodless white, but he was capably working on Matthews' arm.

Rhi felt a swell of pride. People reacted to shock in different ways, and you never knew who'd be
catatonic and who'd be a screamer until the shit hit the fan. Joker clearly became cold. Efficient. He'd break later – everyone did – but it was the best response she could hope for. The one she looked for in front-line troops.

She slid in beside them and pulled medigel from its spot in her armor. "Doc's on her way. Sit-rep?"

"Shot one hostile. Haven't seen any others." He gave her a concise rundown of the injuries, including the fact that they hadn't moved Donnelly and ending with Matthews' broken arm. "I can't set it alone."

"Can it wait for the doc?"

"No," he said quietly, "No hand pulse."

_Which meant he was in danger of losing the hand, if they left it. "Shit."_ She had her switchblade out and was running it up under Donnelly's shirt. The parted fabric revealed a band of bruising along the spine. She stripped the gauntlet from her hand and confirmed his pulse. "Thank goodness you didn't jostle him. He'll have to wait for Chakwas. We'll set –" she was interrupted by a whimper of pain, and spun around.

After the first sound, Joker had gone quiet, but tears were streaming down his cheeks.

He was pulling the second of his clearly broken fingers into alignment, wrapping it tight to the unbroken index finger.

_Holy fuck. No wonder he's good with shock._ She took the bandage he'd been fumbling with one-handed and finished the job. "Damn it, Joker, I've got medigel on me –"

"Can't… help you without… both hands," he got out through a grimace. "Save the gel for Matthews. Shrapnel."

She nodded and turned to Matthews' arm.

The break was just short of becoming an open fracture, the end of the bone clearly straining against the skin.

"Stop staring at it, Matthews!" Shepard barked. The navigator obligingly looked away, but he jerked when she moved to touch his arm, and then wailed as the movement jostled the break. _Shit._ She took Matthews' shoulder in an iron grip. "Joker, can you realign it if I restrain him?"

"Yes. Arms are easy. _If_ he doesn't move."

Matthews rolled his eyes in fear. She could feel he wanted to move again, so she straddled him, pinning him and immobilizing his shoulder. "Matthews! Look at me, not at him." She felt Joker lift his arm.

"Matthews," the pilot's voice was steady as a rock, _"Breathe in, deep. Okay, out. In."_ His voice took a hypnotic rhythm. On the fifth _'out', Matthews' shoulder jerked under her arm as Joker applied traction to his wrist, pulling the bone back into alignment._ Shepard looked back, saw Joker nod, and stepped away from the navigator.

The sound of many footsteps echoed down the corridor. She pulled out her pistol and wheeled to face the noise. Three batarians skidded to a stop, guns out and aimed at her.

"Don't touch my fucking crew," she growled.
"Of course they won't," a cool voice assured from behind them, and Aria T'loak emerged from behind her guards.

Shepard aimed at her instead. "What the hell's going on, T'Loak?"

Aria made a dismissive gesture. "Don't be absurd. Why would I destroy part of my own station?" She looked at the mess around her and sneered. "Even if it's a part like this. I've had someone give closer coordinates to your shuttle, by the way. They should be here momentarily."

More footsteps confirmed her statement. Shepard holstered the gun at the welcome sight of Dr. Chakwas' silver hair rounding the corner, followed, surprisingly, by Zaeed. The doctor had been enjoying her shore-leave; it had taken the emergency code to reach through the private setting on her earpiece. Chakwas immediately took charge, pulling out bandages and medigel from the shuttle's emergency kit. She tsked at the bruising on Donnelly's back and immobilized his head while Shepard and Massani got him gently onto a backboard.

Aria's people had spread out to cover the area. The alpha of Omega herself leaned on a wall and watched the Normandy team work. She surprised them all by offering her biotic assistance in moving Donnelly's stretcher.

"Ready, Doc?"

Chakwas nodded. "I can't do more here."

Shepard looked at her disheveled team. Chakwas was supporting a wobbly Matthews, his arm now splinted and bleeding wounds stopped with medigel. Zaeed had an arm around Daniels, whose wounds had been similarly treated. The big merc looked bizarrely protective with the engineer huddled against his side.

Joker looked up from where he was kneeling on the floor and started to push himself to his feet. He got one leg under himself, said, "Shit!" and promptly sat down again. "Stress fracture or something." he said weakly. "I don't remember that…"

Rhi was at his side with one long stride. "Can you walk at all?" She was thinking of a fireman's carry, but the look of injured pride that flashed across his face changed her mind. Instead she knelt down to get an arm around his waist. Don't cave now. You're almost home. He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Ready?"

He nodded, jaw set.

"Okay, here we go." She hauled him to his good leg, arm firmly supportive at his waist.

It was eerily familiar: she'd done the same when she hauled him from the bridge of the first Normandy. She almost said 'We have to stop meeting like this,' but a glance at Joker's pale, tense face stopped the words in her mouth. He was in no state for quips, especially ones that might remind him of that.

"We good? Let's get everyone back to the Normandy."

"The Normandy!" Joker said in alarm. He'd clearly just thought of the danger to the ship.

"Had her stand off from the station as soon as EDI told me about the bomb," Shepard reassured. "Mercer's got 'er safe and sound. Miranda's helming the shuttle."
He subsided, and their ragged parade made its way to safety.

——

Shepard saw Chakwas and the injured safely to the shuttle, then went back to the scene.

She looked around her at the closed shops, the stacked and dusty crates. The blast had definitely been aimed at her crew. There was no one else here. Her anger mounted. Who the hell would do something like that? The mercenaries she'd turned on to rescue Garrus? Trex? 'I don't like under-doing things with explosives,' he'd said.

Aria walked with her. "So, it looks like explosions do follow you, after all."

Shepard growled. "Not my choice, believe me."

Aria beckoned to one of her lieutenants. "Your people got one of them, though."

_Joker, you wonderful man._ "Show me." If he was still alive maybe she could get some answers and make sense of this madness.

They followed a spotty blood trail back down the corridor and into a side passage, where one of Aria's batarian guards stood next to a body. A corpse, Shepard corrected. _Shit. Too much to hope that he'd be alive._ She knelt beside the body and rolled it over, roughly, searching for any clue to his identity. He'd been gutshot, and was already starting to stink. She'd never seen him before.

"No ID," Aria said from behind her. "Already checked. He's a nobody."

"You, with the light," Shepard called the batarian closer, ignoring Aria, and rolled the body so she could see the side of his head. She ran her fingers through the hair over his ear, pulling it apart. Was that red?

"What are you doing?" The queen of Omega didn't like to be confused, and it showed in her voice.

Shepard ignored her, pulled out her switchblade, and cut the hair off close to the corpse's scalp, revealing a patch of lurid red tattoo.

She'd had an almost identical mark, once.

"Trex," she growled. She stood up, staring down at the corpse. Of _course_ it was Trex and the Reds. She'd hurt him, and Trex _liked_ payback.

T'Loak was watching, impassive.

Shepard matched her frozen expression. "I know who it was, and I'll deal with him." Her lip twisted in disgust. "As soon as I figure out where the bastard's hiding."

"I'll have someone look into it." Aria narrowed her eyes. "I don't like people messing with my station."

——

Shepard stepped back onto the _Normandy_, covered in dirt and grime, and immediately ordered Mercer to stand off from the station again.

She took a quick shower, not wanting to bring any more potential contaminants into the med lab, then went to check on her crew. Matthews was under; Chakwas' assistant was still carefully
removing shrapnel from his shoulder. The broken arm was safely encased in plaswrap, the scalp wound neatly gelled and bandaged. Rhi lingered just long enough to get a status update, careful to stay out of the light.

The pad Miranda had handed Shepard when she boarded had listed Daniels as 'under observation; small risk of internal injuries.' She was conscious but sedated, wrapped in layers of heated blankets.

"How you holding up, Daniels?" Shepard asked quietly, perching on the edge of her bed.

"Fine, Commander." Her voice was shaky and slow with the sedative, but color had started to come back to her cheeks. "J-just some little stuff in my b-back. And my ears hurt." She suddenly looked mortified. "I'm sorry I shot you!"

Rhi gently touched the uninjured shoulder. "No harm done. You did just fine, Daniels. Rest up and you'll be back to work in no time."

"Of course!" Gabby's eyes flashed; she loved her work. Getting back to it would be enough motivation for her. "But Ken –" Her eyes flicked to the thin white screens that hid the other bed from view. Behind them, the unmistakable silhouettes of Mordin and Chakwas shifted in the bright surgical light.

"Is well on his way to having everything put back where it should be," she reassured her. "None of you aggravated the spinal injury – leaving him alone was the best thing you could have done." Shepard was more worried about possible brain injury, but she kept that fear to herself. Even with all their advanced equipment, you could never be quite sure about that until the patient woke up. "I'll make sure someone keeps you informed, okay?"

Daniels nodded. "Th-thanks, Commander."

"Get some rest."

Rhi had no intention of distracting the doctors at their work, but Chakwas slipped out from behind the screens.

"Spinal cord is undamaged. We've fixed the fractures to prevent further injury – vertebra and multiple ribs. Kidneys were in bad shape, but it's under control. The rest…" the doctor shook her head. "You know bombs, Commander."

Shepard nodded. Incendiaries were the most vicious to look at; once you saw someone with their skin burned off the image never left you. The shock-and-shrapnel variety was less flashy, but the injuries were harder to catch. "Other internal damage?"

"Not presenting anything major at the moment. I'll keep him under close observation. He had a frontal concussion, though. We'll know more when he wakes up."

"What about Daniels? She looks like hell warmed over."

"Covered in hematomas under those blankets, but she was lucky. She'll be good for light duty in a couple of days – and that's my medical recommendation, Commander. She'll be sore, but better she have a job to do than stew."

"Agreed. Anything else?"

"You should go speak to Joker."
"Of course." The last time she'd seen the helmsman he'd been seated in the shuttle, coolly dealing with his own injuries so the doctor could give all her attention to Donnelly. Shepard scrubbed her hand over her eyes. "Where is he?"

The doctor gestured towards the far corner, past the screened area, to a set of bowed shoulders. Rhi sat down in a chair across from him. "Hey," she said quietly, "I grabbed your hat."

His right hand lay across his lap, ring and middle fingers neatly splinted now. He shrugged. "You did good out there." Impressively so, in fact, but she knew by now he'd brush off more effusive compliments.

He looked up, green eyes tired. "I should have been able to do more. If I wasn't half-broken I'd have -"

Shepard interrupted him. "Bullshit. You probably saved all of your lives."

"Don't baby me, Commander."

"Jeff!" She was taken aback by his defensiveness, and it came out angrier than she'd meant. He looked up at her in surprise. She reminded herself that he was medicated, in pain, and recovering from shock, and softened her expression and her voice. "Joker. You shot the man who came after you once you were down. That saved Donnelly, and most likely the rest of you as well. It's unlikely any of you would have died from wounds if you hadn't provided first aid, but they'll all be a lot better off since you did."

She paused. "And I spent the last hour with our techs and a team of Aria's. That bomb should have killed you all."

He scowled at her, but he was listening. "It didn't because the trigger-man set it off too early. He probably panicked when Gabby suggested going back for a cab." She rested her elbows on her knees, suddenly tired. "If you hadn't been getting tired, if she hadn't turned back, he would have waited until you were all right on top of it, and -" Damn it. Her voice hadn't shaken. She was a god damn marine. She dealt with these risks every day.

"Hey, Commander," he said gently. "No 'what-if's, remember?"

She looked up, warmed by his tone. "Caught out with my own rule?"

He started to nod then stopped himself, weaving a little. Pain meds must make him woozy. "I'll let you rest."

"No, wait!" He turned his head to follow her, but the motion was too quick for his drug-addled inner ear, and he closed his eyes.

"Still here. What is it?"

"Why?" He said through gritted teeth. "Who?"

Me. My history. My forgotten baggage. No, that was bullshit. It wasn't her fault some asshole wanted to get even with her, and she wasn't going to claim his guilt. Fuck that noise. "Trex," she growled. "And I'm going to get rid of him before he gets a third chance to fuck with me and mine."
"Good hunting, Commander," Joker whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks are due to both my marvelous beta, Tera Danielle, and to my little brother, whose EMT training helped with the aftermath.
"This is the spot." Aria's image gestured to an urban area on a populated planet.

Trex' choice of headquarters was unfortunate, but not unexpected. Shepard discarded her daydreams of testing the Normandy's new main gun on his hideout. Without the prohibition on firing mass-accelerator weapons at habitable planets, the galaxy would be unlivable for every species by now; mutually assured destruction on a grand scale. She knew that.

*It would have been really satisfying, though.*

"Mercer, set a course for these coordinates. Run silent past the relay." Chakwas had sternly told Joker to get all the rest he could, an order Rhi had been happy to reinforce. Let him heal. They'd need his skills soon enough.

She turned back to Aria. "Thank you."

The asari shrugged. "Just get rid of him."

"Oh, my pleasure." Rhi's grin was predatory.

The screen above her desk went black, and Shepard took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders back. She'd felt the almost imperceptible shift in the Normandy's background hum as Mercer obeyed her. After days of useless waiting they were finally underway. Her restless energy would have an outlet – soon. Until then, it wouldn't do to be seen sprinting around the ship. She kept it to an easy jog on her way to the CIC.

---

"Fifteen minutes out, Commander."

Shepard started towards the cockpit on autopilot before remembering that it was Mercer, not Joker, who'd be at the helm. Miranda Lawson followed two paces behind, waiting for orders. Rather than look indecisive, Shepard continued towards the pilot's chair and had Mercer pull up a visual of their target.

"We sure he's there?"

Miranda nodded. "EDI's had weeks to decipher their communications encryption – they never changed it after the incident with Vanessa. She backed it up with a voice-print, too. That's his place and the owner is home."

Trex had certainly moved up in the world. The four-level building was in a bad neighborhood, but that was the way he'd like it. *Fewer cops in the slums. Might have to get their hands dirty.* She'd lay money that the place was built like a bunker, no matter how ramshackle it looked from the outside. *You could fit a lot of cronies in a place that size. Reds HQ as well as home-sweet-home?*

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "Simple, then." There was no one to protect this time. No need for subtlety. "Take a small team and go in shooting."
"A small team, Commander?" Miranda's eyes flicked her way. "That's a ridiculous risk. Please remember this is only a distraction from our real mission."

"No, my crew getting hurt by his idiocy is a distraction," Rhi said, "and one I'm about to remove. Never fight on two fronts of you can help it, Lawson." She drummed her fingers on the back of Mercer's chair. "And a small team is the only way to deal with Trex. The minute he thinks he can't win, he'll run. Have to let him think he has a chance."

An odd step-step-clack heralded Joker's arrival, moving with the support of a single crutch. Shepard raised an eyebrow at him.

"Pressure builds bones, Commander. And you'll want Mercer to helm the shuttle."

Rhi could have pointed out that A) Miranda could helm the shuttle and B) He would hardly develop bone faster in the pilot's chair than in bed, but she knew Joker was aware of his own capabilities and limitations. Besides, she'd rather he be on the other end of her radio than Mercer.

Miranda looked ready to dress him down for insubordination, but she took her cue from Shepard and let it slide. Mercer looked over her shoulder for approval. Rhi nodded and the younger woman slid out of the pilot's chair. Joker settled rather more awkwardly into it, crutch stashed under a console, and stretched his hands. The splinted fingers were an ugly reminder of why she was here. This was necessary… but it was also personal.

She wanted friends at her back, not just team-mates. "Lawson, tell Tali and Garrus to arm up and meet Mercer and I at the shuttle in fifteen."

"Aye aye, Commander."

As they settled into the Kodiak, Shepard felt Vakarian's eyes on her. "Something on your mind, Garrus?"

"Revenge, Shepard?" he asked mildly.

Did he really think she was after the same thing she'd denied him? She shook her head. "Prevention. Can't let him have another chance to try to harm me and mine." She looked him firmly in the eye. "Just taking out the trash, Garrus."

"Surely if you kill the leader, another just rises to his place," Tali pointed out.

"It's not the mafia. No one else has a reason to give a shit about me," Shepard snorted. "Whoever fights their way to the top spot should send me a thank you card." She pulled out her pistol and checked it over one last time as the shuttle started its descent.

Straightforward her plan might be, but that didn't mean they had to go in the front door. The building had multiple entrances, including an air-car deck on the second floor. She asked Mercer to take them in low and smooth. She, Tali, and Garrus lined up for a quick exit.

The shuttle buzzed the landing pad, door open. Shepard jumped, rolled, and came up shooting. The submachine gun kept both the door guards occupied for the seconds it took Garrus and Tali to follow her.

She took down the first guard just as a new man stepped out of the door. He stumbled on the body of his fellow and yelled. Shit. They needed to get inside. There was no cover here for a drawn-out
fight. She signaled Garrus to focus on the remaining door guard, switched to her shotgun, and gathered herself.

The mnemonic was little more than a tensing across her chest and shoulders, as if she was pulling her arms back to grapple. She zeroed in on her target, felt the gathering power under her sternum, and charged.

She crossed the landing platform in a split second. Her shoulder crunched into the unarmored man's chest and sent him flying back through the door and across the room. She followed after, riding the wave of giddy adrenaline that always accompanied the maneuver, and unloaded her shotgun into a woman who'd been about to head out the door herself.

There was one more person in the room; she shot him in the leg as he ran for the door.

Shepard walked over to where he lay gasping. "You have a radio?"

Damn, he was a kid – late teens, maybe. Too young and afraid to resist, anyway. With a shaking hand, he dropped his com unit on the floor. She crushed it with her heel.

"I have two pieces of advice for you. Tie that up, and get yourself the hell out of the Reds." Her shot had been crap; bad for her, but good news for the young thug. He'd heal without even a limp. "You should listen to me. I give good advice."

"True," Garrus agreed, drily. The sudden appearance of the armored and scarred turian scared the wounded teen past sense. Garrus shrugged.

Tali had her omni-tool out. "No alarm system on this level. EDI places Trex on the top floor – heading down. The elevator's that way."

"Stairs?"

Tali pointed, and Shepard led the way, leaving the kid in a puddle of his piss.

The stairs were carpeted, muffling the pounding of their boots. Shepard was almost at the landing when a scout rounded the corner and ran right into her.

She reacted faster than he did. He was on the floor, nose and mouth buried in the carpet, before he'd even made a noise. "D'you want to live?"

The man nodded vigorously.

"Then run like hell. I'm not here for you." She let him up and gave him a shove that sent him tumbling down the stairs.

She was almost up the next flight when she heard a shot. "What was that?"

"He tried to use his radio," Garrus answered. "He won't anymore."

"Idiot didn't know how lucky he was." She reached the upper landing. A small area had been set up as a waiting room. The double-doors at the end were sealed. "Tali, deal with this. And send Chiktikka in first."

Shepard took position to the right of the door, leaning against the wall. Tali flattened herself next to her, three-fingered hand dancing over her omni-tool. When Garrus reached the landing he took the position opposite them without a word.
"What's the hold up?"

"Security lock-down," Tali explained. "They had to realize something was wrong eventually. One more code, and… there! Chiktikka!"

Tali's combat drone was the first thing through the opening doors. There was a brief pause, and then a hail of gunfire. Shepard locked eyes with Garrus and mouthed a countdown. On three, they leaned out of cover – and thanks to the attack on the drone, they knew which directions to look for their targets.

Shepard covered the area with fire from the submachine gun and ducked back around the corner. Only then did her brain process what she'd seen beyond sorting it into 'cover' and 'targets'. The room was lined with computers and equipment, with a projection table taking center-stage, surrounded by seating and smaller work-stations. There had to be at least ten people in there. Armed, but only lightly armored. Had one of them had alloy-bright teeth and a sneer?

Tali's voice rang out, shattering her doubt. "Get off your asses, morons! There aren't that many of them!"

"Hold this point, Garrus. Tali, keep their shields down for me." She risked a quick look. There he was – middle of the room. She could take him out, easy, but then she'd be surrounded. No sense being stupid.

She sent a surge of biotic power down her left arm, gathering in her palm, and tossed it down the middle of the room. She followed in the wake of the shock wave, protected by the confusion of falling bodies, and vaulted over a work-bench. The room smelled of burning electronics thanks to her near-random fire earlier. She tried to breathe through her mouth.

"Ah, I know this – playing bowling, right?" Garrus punctuated his quip with a shot from his rifle.

Shepard glanced out of cover, aimed at one of the few people still standing, and shot twice in quick succession. Her target slid down the wall, out of the fight.

The shock wave was little more than a distraction to armored troops, but some of the unprepared Reds had been thrown hard enough to be incapacitated. Had Trex been one of the ones she sent flying? Shepard skirted the bench, looking for her old enemy. Out of the corner of her eye she saw someone crawling for the wall, but before she could aim a woman stepped out in front of her with a gun pointed at her gut.

Shepard dodged on reflex and the point-blank shot glanced off her side, taking down her shields and a layer of ceramic instead of hitting her squarely. She grabbed the woman's gun hand before she could fire again and twisted the weapon out of her grip, kneeing her sharply in the belly as she pulled her over.

A flicker of motion caught her eye, and she looked up over the woman's bent form just in time to see Trex. *Fuck!* The crawler had been him. He slapped a panel on the seemingly blank wall, opening a concealed door, and ran.

Rhi threw her assailant to the side and ran after him, shouting for her squad to follow. She wasn't going to do this twice.

The door opened on a utility stairwell. Trex's retreating footsteps echoed up the cement shaft. *Down.* She tore after him, heedless of the alarms, and Garrus and Tali followed. Tali, ever thoughtful, took the time to sabotage the door.
Two flights, three – Shepard grabbed the handrail to spin herself around onto the next – four, five – the place was a damn bunker, they were a story below ground level, now. She rattled down the last flight of stairs, pistol at the ready, searching for her target in the suddenly dim light.

The entire level was open, one big basement. No, she corrected herself, garage. It smelled of oil and dust. A gleaming row of motorcycles was parked in front of a giant door on one end. Trex was astride one, a perfect target, but in the split second it took her eyes to adjust he sped out the open door and into the dimness beyond.

Rhi was sprinting for the bikes before he'd cleared the door. She picked one near the end and looked at the ignition, cracking her helmet seals with one hand. She didn't need an omni-tool for this.

Tali and Garrus skidded to a stop behind her.

"Do those have... wheels?" The turian asked in disbelief.

"Course," Rhi muttered. She pulled out a hair pin while her other hand followed the ignition wire. She had to bend over to see where it ended in the body of the bike. Bingo.

"Can you drive one?"

She could have suggested single-handedly charging a manned emplacement and Garrus wouldn't have sounded that dubious.

"Ride. Think we could afford eezo crap at home?" She pulled the wire loose and substituted her bent hairpin. When she heard the click of the ignition she turned to the neighboring bike, already fishing for another pin. "When everyone and their dog got an air-car, we still used the streets."

"Shepard, I don't know how –" Tali moaned.

"Behind me." She couldn't fix another bike anyway; she was out of pins. Her hair had fallen down around her face. She wadded it back up and pulled her helmet on, stepped over the bike, and pulled Tali up behind her. "Hang on!"

She twisted the throttle gently and Tali's arms tightened around her in terror. "Shiiiii –" the roar of the engine drowned out the quarian's cry.

The garage opened onto an access tunnel. "EDI! Get me a beacon!" Shepard turned right, following the path of Trex's departing tail-lights. She wasted a few precious seconds getting used to the bike, trying not to think how long it'd been since she'd been on one. EDI programmed a tracer on her HUD; a blinking light in her peripheral vision told her which direction her quarry had gone. Not at full speed, it seemed – does he think he gave us the slip? Probably. The tunnels and alleys under the slums were a warren, and he certainly didn't know about EDI. You're not getting away, Trex.

The bike purred, engine nowhere near its limits. Damn, she'd forgotten how much fun this was. Tali's fear could be a problem, though. She was hanging on for dear life; if Shepard hadn't been in armor she'd probably have arm-shaped bruises.

"You'll be fine, Tal! Just stick to my back. Do exactly what I do."

"Shepaaaard!"

"We'll try it, ready? 3, 2, 1 –" She swerved right around a corner, leaning with the bike, and the quarian did as she asked – though her grip remained as tight as ever. "Good girl, Tal, that's it! Glued
to my back. Let's go!"

Joker was uncharacteristically silent, terrified of distracting Shepard. The footage from her helmet cam was frighteningly close to the road surface.

She rounded the corner and straightened up, and he let out his breath. *Holy shit.* It was funny, how much faster 'fast' felt when you knew that the – the – the contraption – was touching the ground. *Wheels. Shit.* Reassured for the moment, he flipped to Garrus's feed. It had taken the turian a while to get the hang of the controls and get going, but Joker was still impressed. *He's probably reading instructions off his visor, poor guy.* His feed showed approaching tail-lights, and then his headlights shone off of Tali's suit.

Shepard shot a glance back, leaned forward, and upped the pace.

Garrus followed gamely, but it was clear from the jerky motion of the vid-feed that he didn't know what he was doing. Shepard on the other hand...

Joker shook his head in wonder. *Who knew? There's a vehicle in the galaxy she can actually drive!*

Shepard heard it, first; the low rumble of a third bike. The maze of access-routes and alleyways twisted the sound. If she'd had to rely on ears alone, she would never have been able to track it. But EDI's little blinking display was there, telling her where to go.

She rounded a corner, saw the retreating form of Trex, and gunned the engine.

The Reds had never gone in for loud bikes. Noise meant wasted energy; it was what posers did for show. Even when their replacement parts had been re-purposed scrap, they'd kept their machines tuned, and the machine Rhi was riding was better than anything they'd managed to cobble together back then.

Still, when the purr rose to a muffled roar, Trex realized his danger, leaned forward and opened his lead.

The real chase was on.

Shepard lowered herself over the bike and poured on the speed.

In the cockpit of the Normandy, a small audience had collected. Jack was leaning over one shoulder, Kasumi the other, eyes glued to the projection.

Joker'd thought they were going fast enough before, but it had been nothing compared to this. The exhaust pipes of Shepard's bike started to discolor with heat, the silver metal becoming an inky blue. Overhead lights flashed by. Suddenly they were in another open area, garage or cargo storage, and Trex was shooting off to the left, swinging wide. Shepard made a tighter turn, bike leaning hard, head terrifyingly close to the ground, and an awful screeching assaulted his ears.

*What the –* Joker flipped to Garrus's feed. Shepard's armored knee was brushing the road surface. The awful sound was the ceramic burning itself away against the cement. *She'll never be able to pull out of that,* he thought, but as she came out of the curve the bike righted itself. She'd closed the
distance between them to ten meters.

They were out of the open area and back into the tunnels once more.

"Shepard, the target just sent instructions to persons unknown." Rhi could hardly hear EDI's voice over the rush of wind and the growl of the engine. "They will attempt to close a barrier between you and Trex."

"Roger." Just have to get closer, then. After she'd gained on the corner she hadn't been able to gain as much as a foot more… but Trex hadn't been able to pull away, either.

She still hadn't managed to close before the trap was sprung; a metal gate started to rattle down from the ceiling just as Trex passed beneath it and into another brightly lit cavern.

Garrus cursed at losing their quarry, but Shepard wasn't ready to admit defeat. Her eyes narrowed, focused on Trex's retreating form and the shrinking space under the gate.

"SHEPARD!" Tali shrieked. They couldn't get under the gate in time; the bike was giving all it had, and the barrier was too far away. But still she didn't slow.

A familiar bloom of power started to grow in her chest.

"Hang. On," Rhi growled through gritted teeth. Here goes nothing...

A blue nimbus burst into being around her, then slowly, too slowly, it grew, until it encompassed Tali and the bike.

Rhi held it in her mind, in her nerves, an almost uncontrollable amount of power, and fixed all her attention on her enemy.

Then she let go.

It was the same mechanism she used to charge, but now she, Tali, and the bike were one unit, hurtling through a massless space at speeds the mind couldn't comprehend, leaving the closing gate behind them, aimed at one thing. The biotic barrier surrounding them carried their force ahead like a bow wave, former mass and new terrific speed combining into a deadly miracle of inertia as they hit Trex's bike.

Time slowed with the after-effects of the charge.

Impact jarring her limbs, deathly force softened by the barrier.

Trex's mouth opening in a scream.

His bike sliding sideways across the floor.

Tali's hands around her in a death-grip.

The smell of burning rubber.

Shepard nearly dislocated her shoulders keeping her bike upright. Her muscles screamed; so did Tali. The worst was the high-pitched scream of Trex's bike scraping across the floor. Desperate to avoid the same fate, Rhi threw all her weight against the pull of gravity and steered into the skid.
The tense spectators on the Normandy watched through Garrus’ cam as Shepard exerted enough power to fling herself, Tali, and a motorcycle at speeds too fast for the human eye. The collision itself was obscured by a blaze of biotic blue and the bars of the gate. Trex's bike was flying sideways, the gang leader half-under it, but Joker's eyes were only for Shepard as she brought her bike to a screeching halt facing her enemy.

Shepard swung off the bike, pulled her pistol, and stalked forward, armor glinting in flickering over-head lights.

Jack's voice was low and breathy. "Shit, sometimes I want to fuck her." She glanced at Joker sideways. "Don't you, flyboy?"

Shit, Jack can tell!

No, wait. That was just Jack being Jack.

Joker didn't say a word.

Trex lay on his back, crushed under the bike, and begged. Never ride more than you can lift off your leg, said a voice from her past.

"Should have remembered your own advice, bastard," she told him.

She stared down at him. His face was as white with shock as Gabby's had been. His leg was bloodier than Matthews with his shoulder full of shrapnel. He was as immobilized as Donnelly.

"Rhi, help me. Help me, I'll stop, I'm sorry, it was stupid. We were kids together, damn it, come on, you remember!"

Her face was impassive, but underneath emotions roiled. She couldn't convince the Alliance that she hadn't defected. She couldn't fight Cerberus, couldn't punch the smug superiority off of the Illusive Man's face, couldn't fill a data pad with all of his crimes and make him eat it.

But Trex… Trex was at her mercy.

"I'll leave you alone, just lift the bike." Tears were running down his face. The alloy teeth weren't smiling anymore. "God, my leg. Please, Rhi! We're the only ones left, doesn't that mean something?" His voice broke in a sob. "Just help me, sweet fucking Christ, please!"

He'd never been a good person.

There was no reason he shouldn't pay.

She flexed her gauntleted fingers.

"Shepard." Joker's voice in her ear piece was so soft she almost didn't hear it. "Remember your own advice? What did you tell Garrus?"

Her eyes flicked sideways. The turian was staring at her, bright eyes cold and unreadable. She hadn't let him revenge himself on Sidonis.

The adrenaline of the chase coursed through her, demanding an outlet. Trex was still begging, still
apologizing. *He doesn't really mean it. Not yet.* She could still make him eat his shiny metal teeth. Her biotics flickered down her arm, around her clenching fist.

"Just trash, Commander?" Garrus asked, dryly.

She took a deep breath. *Right. Just trash.*

Rhi nodded, once, and put a bullet in Trex's skull.

She started to walk away, then paused and loaded an incendiary round. She buried the slug in his chest and the body went up in flames.

"Tali, see about getting that gate open. EDI, find us a route above ground for shuttle pick-up." She looked around, and added as an afterthought, "Bring the bikes."

–––

Shepard was on deck within moments of the shuttle landing. Joker spun around to stare at her. The left knee of her armor was worn almost to nothing, a thin layer of gray ceramic where there should have been deep blue. There was grime on her right cheekbone and blood on her gauntlet, and she looked... alive. Vibrantly, energetically alive. He could feel the adrenaline coming off of her in waves, barely contained energy finding outlet in sparks of blue biotic power that flickered down her body, eyes on fire, full lips cat-smug.

This wasn't Alliance commander Shepard. This was all Rhi.

"Whoaaah." Jack said, quietly.

Shepard grinned, a full, lazy, predatory grin full of white teeth. "I got a bike."

"Yeah." Jack sounded blasé, but it was a shade of blasé that said she was impressed, if you knew how to read her.

Rhi stretched her arms, lifting herself onto her toes. Not her normal athlete's functional stretch, but something altogether more catlike.

*Damn, you should not be able to look that sensuous in armor.*

She sank back onto the deck plating, letting the last biotics die down. Jack looked her over then met Shepard's smoldering brown eyes with her own half-lidded ones.

"Wanna get high?"

Shepard seemed to come back to herself for a moment, the cool-commander face sliding into place. "You have our next coordinates, Joker? We're all done here."

He nodded. He didn't quite trust his speech.

She acknowledged him then glanced at Jack. "Yeah, okay. Meet you in ten." She chuckled and walked off towards the elevator. "Down in your pit."

Joker watched her go – that saucy sway she never had in her walk suddenly very much in evidence – and clenched his teeth. Shepard. High. With Jack. His poor imagination couldn't decide if it was in heaven or hell, and he swung his chair back 'round before other parts decided for him and became too damn obvious.
Jack leaned over again, lips close to his ear, and fired one parting shot before she returned to her
cave: "Stop grinding your teeth, lover-boy. She doesn't dig chicks."

He barely noticed when she stalked back to the elevator.

Chapter End Notes

By the early 2100s, due to congestion and fuel scarcity, the motorcycle was one of the
most common modes of personal transport in Earth’s megalopolises. The discovery of
mass effect technology in 2148 started a radical shift, however, and in just over a
decade flying vehicles became the norm, allowing all but the very poor to rise above
the squalor of the ground level streets.

While some companies embraced this development with 'futuristic' styling, others
capitalized on the insecurity felt by many humans at the realization that they were not
alone in the galaxy. Fear of change lead to nostalgia for various supposed 'golden ages'
of humanity, a wave savvy marketers were happy to ride.

In the '50s and early '60s, the most commonly sold motorcycles were 'centennial'
models, designed to emulate the styling of the i19/i50s and 60s. Though exponentially
more fuel efficient than their forbears, in many ways the bikes were a return to a more
simplistic engineering school and practical aesthetic... which was lucky, as the march
of progress soon one out over the haze of nostalgia, and all but a handful of
manufacturers went out of business or shut down their internal-combustion engine
arms, making parts difficult to find.

Motorcycle enthusiasts remained, but real collectors of the classics tended to prefer the
actual antiques rather than the copycat centennial models. By 2165, when Shepard
first joined the Reds, it was more common to find a centennial in the dump than in a
garage.
Shepard relaxed, arms spread out along Jack's cot and feet out in front of her. She wasn't quite ready to tell Jack how glad she was of her offer. Every once in a while there was a battle that left you needing to fuck or get fucked up, and the former wasn't exactly available to her – in any way she wanted, at least. It felt amazing to let the worry and adrenaline flow out of her.

She thought briefly of the odd expression she'd caught on Joker's face when he heard Jack's invite. *Hmph. Straight-laced spacer boy.* She smiled fondly and then sighed. So he didn't appreciate her bad habits – it hardly made things worse. It was about time she recognized that she was shit outta luck in that area.

Jack passed the joint back, and Rhi took another drag. *Maybe tomorrow. I never did give up easy.*

"Yo, space cadet. You in there?"

Shepard lolled her head back on the cot to look up at Jack. "Space Commander, to you. Reporting for fucking duty." She blew smoke in the other woman's face. "S'not like you're being a scintillating conversationalist or anything." It took her a long time to say 'scintillating.'

Jack laughed. "Dude, you're stoned."


"Aw, c'mon. S'good for you."

Rhi snorted. "S'just less bad for me than drinking."

"Shit, Shepard. Doesn't matter to me how you do it, but you need to relax."

"What, it'll be easier to kill a buncha bug people if I'm mellow?" Shepard chuckled. "'Anyway, who're you to talk?"

Jack's upper lip curled. "Like I can relax on this damn ship."

*Hmm. She has a point.* Shepard thought for a long moment then used her omni-tool to page operative Lawson, holding a finger to her lips and winking in response to Jack's questioning look.

"Miranda. How much do we have in that discretionary fund?" *Not enough for anything useful, but maybe..." Thank you, Miranda, that will be all."

Jack looked about to burst. "What the hell –?"

"Shh. I'm commander-ing." Rhi wagged her finger in the air and made another call. "Joker. We in need of a fuel stop soon?"

"It never hurts..." he sounded suspicious.

"Time to nearest depot?"

"About two hours."
"Excellent." Fuel depots weren't exactly destination spots, but there was always at least a bar. "The crew needs a break. First round of drinks are on me. You can be the bear of good news." Rhi stuck her fist in her mouth to hold back a giggle, took a deep breath, and said carefully, "Er. Bearer of good news."

"...Right. Uh, aye aye, Commander."

A moment later, Joker's voice sounded on the ship-wide comm. It hadn't even had a chance to die down before Miranda called. Shepard turned the volume so low she could only hear occasional words. 'Cerberus funds' cropped up several times, and so did 'fiscal irresponsibility.' When Miranda had run her course, Rhi corrected her earpiece volume and spoke for the first time. "Morale, operative Lawson."

"Cerberus does not condone such inefficient –"

Rhi rolled her eyes, said "Love you too, babe," and hung up, while Jack rolled off her cot with laughter.

—-

The Normandy cruised towards the fuel depot, taking her time. Only two other ships were there, a fast courier and a big tramp freighter. The courier left while they were still docking.

Brisk footfalls warned Joker the commander was on deck. He waited for the thud of the docking clamps and then turned around to greet her.

_Huh, she must really mean it. Whole crew's goin' drinkin'. _He was surprised to see she wasn't wearing a Cerberus uniform. She must have picked something up somewhere. Everything he'd seen her wear since her revival had a Cerberus logo... _Except for the dress._ The black shirt she wore now wasn't far from Alliance ship-casuals in cut, and he was pretty sure those were the same old black fatigues, but at least it didn't scream 'pro-human terrorist'.

Funny, how being reminded that Shepard existed out of uniform reminded him that, well, she could exist out of uniform. _Heh._

He realized his glance had lingered a little too long when she slowly raised one eyebrow and pinned him with a look. The corner of her mouth twitched up.

"Do I pass inspection, helmsman?" All traces of her earlier tongue-tripping were gone.

He rubbed his face to hide his blush. "Er, sorry. Long shift." It hadn't been long by his usual standards, but he was still technically on medical light-duty. It'd pass.

"You've earned your break, then."

Joker weighed the prospect of sharing a cheap bar with people he saw too much of already versus the idea of pouting pathetically on the Normandy. He could always point out that his last foray off the ship hadn't exactly ended well, though remembering Patel, he suspected if Shepard thought he was afraid she'd _order_ him to the party. Get back on the horse, as the phrase went. Not that he'd ever _seen_ a horse. Besides, drinks with the engineers really hadn't been too bad — at least, until things started exploding. And, well... Shepard would be there.

"Yeah, just have to run the last checks and I'll join everyone."

Joker stretched out the normal post-dock procedures to give everyone else a chance to clear out of
the ship. There was almost a party atmosphere as they filtered by him out the airlock. When only the skeleton crew remained aboard, he pulled his crutch from under the console and made his slow way back to crew quarters. The leg break had turned out to be a stress fracture of the tibia, and the magic that Cerberus had put in the intramedulary rods really did seem to be accelerating the healing process. He considered leaving the crutch by his bunk for the evening, but decided discretion was the better part of valor. Better to look a bit awkward than get halfway through the night and realize he was too tired to walk without it.

Besides, he thought with an unexpected glow of pride, no one could say he hadn't earned it. This break was a war wound.

The recreation area of the fuel depot was a mix of seedy bar, seedy café, and seedy games room, with an extra helping of seedy. A truly unappetizing display of food was slowly congealing under warming lights in a glass case, one half dextro, one levo. The mirrored bar looked well stocked, at least, and there were a variety of entertainments to amuse bored freighter crews while their massive ships refueled. It was funny to see how many human traditions had joined the alien mix. There was a pool table and a holo-dart board as well as a machine for turian strategy sims and a popular hanar skill-game. Matthews had teamed up with Hadley against Robson and Kasumi on the latter, but they weren't quite coordinated enough for a game that designed for one being with four limbs (Joker'd once shipped with a navigator who managed to play passably standing on one foot, using her bare toes for the third control and moving between the others with her hands… but she'd had exceedingly nimble toes).

He grinned as he hobbled towards the bar. Physics games were common everywhere, but what was really human about the fuel depots was the uniformity of décor.

_Fear us, for we have spread to the stars, and we brought our ugly faux-wood paneling._

Joker perched on a bar stool, ordered a G&T, and surveyed the room. Shepard was talking to Miranda, gesturing at the happy crowd. Trying to smooth over whatever-it-was from earlier, he guessed. Miranda had been pissed. Now the operative had a tall, triple-layered drink in her hand and a grudging smile. She moseyed off to talk to Jacob, and Shepard leaned against the wall, watching with half-lidded eyes and a small content smile.

Chambers hopped up on the stool next to him and followed his gaze. "Funny, isn't it?"

"'Scuse me?"

"Samara, Thane, Shepard… I feel like they observe more with their eyes half-closed than most of us do if we stare. It's like they're always watching you!" Chambers shivered delightedly, like a teen a watching a horror flick. "It's so wonderfully unsettling."


"Ooh, I wouldn't mind being their prey." Kelly winked.

"Which one?" Joker's brow furrowed. _They certainly run the gamut of gender and species._

She pouted. "Do I have to choose?"

His eyebrows rose. "That's… really varied taste you have there, Kelly."

"I'm a very loving person." She shrugged. "Oh, honestly, I would never dare approach Samara."
Don't be ridiculous. Her stare is *withering*.

"Huh. I always thought Garrus was the most eagle-eyed of the bunch, but now…" Joker's voice drifted off, and they all turned to look at Garrus.

Who would ever have guessed the turian was so good at ping-pong?

"Hand/eye coordination… impressive," allowed Mordin.

"Yes, but not *exactly* nightmare material."

"Speaking of nightmares," Chakwas said, "I'd been meaning to ask. You've performed Gilbert and Sullivan, Mordin – are you familiar with *Iolanthe*?"

"Of course! Did not know you were interested."

"I adore it," she said, "We'll have to compare favorites later, yes?" Joker's drink arrived, and Chakwas looked at it meaningfully. "Did you take any painkillers this afternoon, Jeff?"

"No, *mom*," he said, "Went straight for the gin."

"Good boy," she said, twinkling. "I'll let you buy me a drink."

"Buy the expensive one first. It's on Shepard."

Mordin blinked. "Was under impression Commander lacked personal funds."

Chakwas waved her hand. "Oh, she's perfectly capable of… acquiring resources… suitable to maintaining the standards of morale necessary for optimum crew function."

"Wow," Kelly giggled, "that sounded pretty convincing."

Chakwas smiled smugly. "She learned from the best, dear." Her drink arrived, looking surprisingly fruity.

"That's not your usual fare, Doc."

"Their supply of high-end cognac leaves something to be desired." The doctor scanned the room theatrically, eyes stopping briefly at the pool table and the retro juke-box. "I can't think why. So, when in Rome…" she tipped her glass back. "Shall we chat later, Mordin? I have to check on my recalcitrant patient every hour or so, and it's about that time again. Ta!"

Kelly shook her head. "I hope Donnelly's not too jealous when she walks in with that drink."

"From the way he's been behaving? He deserves it."

Eventually Kelly wandered away to mingle, and her place at the bar was filled by Matthews, Kasumi, and Hadley in succession, as each waited for their refill. Finally Shepard walked over.

She winked at him, rested her elbows on the bar, and said in a painfully tragic voice, "Bartender, my beer is broken."

"Excuse me?" the batarian blinked at her with his top set of eyes.

Shepard's eyebrows furled and she examined the bottle morosely. "There's a hole in the top of the bottle and all the beer came out."
"...one more coming up."

"Knew you could fix it!"

Joker chuckled. "How much have you had?"

"Oh, come on," she said, "Just the one. It takes a lot more than that to get by the Cerberus Liver. I was just playing." She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "We're allowed to do that, you know."

"Oh, I know." He grabbed a cocktail umbrella from one of the unattended glasses on the bar, sucked off the bit of grapefruit stuck to it, and deposited it neatly in her beer bottle.

Shepard looked down at her bottle, neatly capped by the cocktail umbrella Joker had slipped in it. "There's a design flaw here."

Kelly waved from near the jukebox, and Shepard nodded farewell to Joker and went to talk to her, carrying her umbrella-d beer. Joker followed her progress, enjoying the way her relaxation showed in her walk. She stopped to say something to Jacob, who was busy losing to Miranda at eight-ball, and then continued on.

Man, it'd been awhile since he'd played pool. Another past-time lost to the awful depression after the Normandy died. He glanced towards the view-screen, where the SR2 hung against the starfield in all her glory, and then back to Shepard, who was shaking her head at Kelly and poking at the juke-box.

"Ready for dessert, flyboy?"

"Huh?" Joker hadn't heard Jack walk up behind him over the blaring music of the dive.

"I bet you like your desserts just like your drinks," Jack nodded toward the group near the jukebox, "with umbrellas in 'em." She licked her painted lips. "Tasty."

Shepard had just fished the umbrella out of her bottle and was tucking it into her hair.

The best defense would be to mockingly admit it. All I have to say is 'hell yeah, I'd tap that' and she'll leave me alone. But he couldn't spit it out. It didn't help that he'd woken up that morning thinking about that exact thing. His imaginings surged back, uncomfortably vivid, and he managed to mumble an entirely unconvincing "I've no idea what you're talking about," which was probably worse than nothing at all.

The music changed, abruptly becoming growlier, synthesized tones giving way to drums and electric guitar. Shepard had won the Battle of the Jukebox. She walked back towards the bar, hips swaying slightly in time to the pulsing beat. Joker tried to place the band to distract himself – Black Alley Varren? Iron Maiden? Heat Sink? – and gave up.

As Shepard passed the pool table where Miranda was squinting, totally intent, she waved the fingers of one hand, almost imperceptibly. The butt of the cue in Lawson's hand glowed biotic-blue just as the Cerberus operative took her shot. The end dipped and the cue hit the ball at entirely the wrong angle, sending the it careening wildly. Miranda cursed.

Shepard's face remained impressively blank as she moseyed back to Joker and Jack and joined them, leaning back against the bar.

"In the places I learned to play pool, you'da been killed for a trick like that," Jack muttered.
"The places I learned, too," Shepard said. There was just a hint of smug humor in her voice.

"You play?" Joker asked.

"Sure." She shrugged. "Been awhile, though. Probably rusty. You?"

"Used to play a lot. In fact," he caught Jacob's eye, "I'll play the winner, if no one else is." He ordered another drink and sat back to watch Miranda, upset by her spectacular (Shepard-induced) failure, work her way to defeat. When she conceded to Jacob (with surprisingly good grace), he stepped up to take her place.

For the first time since the explosion, Joker was glad that he'd broken the fingers of his right hand rather than his left. He couldn't make a bridge with two fingers splinted together, but he could certainly hold a cue. He'd forgotten how much he enjoyed the game. The physics of it had always appealed to him. On a more practical level, it didn't take much in the way of strength, and with the table to lean on, he didn't even need crutches.

He won one, then lost one and sat out, then won again. The muscle memory was slowly starting to come back. He felt more at ease with the rest of the crew when he had something to do, too. It was nice to remember he wasn't doomed to sitting on the side-lines of everything.

A few games and several more drinks into the evening, he was lining up his shot when Jack shouted "Shepard's playing the winner!"

"I am?" Shepard asked. There was a muffled conversation he couldn't quite hear, and then Shepard's low chuckle. He looked up to see them both looking at him (or maybe just at the game – he couldn't be sure). It was quite the study in contrasts; Jack petite, her skin fair and exposed under the patchwork of her tattoos; Shepard tall, muscled, and in comparatively conservative civvies, all warm shades of brown except for the deep purple-black of her full lips.

Jack winked at him. He was lucky he'd already taken his shot, because he did a double take, which made her laugh.

Fifteen minutes later he beat Jacob with a tricky bank shot. He was feeling almost cocky when Shepard stalked over, testing the weight of a cue. He remembered the fatal twitch of Miranda's cue, and he scowled theatrically at her. "I'm watching you, Shepard."

"Oh, I hope so." Her lips twitched upwards, but all her attention was on the cue. She rolled it on the table to make sure it was straight.

He took another drink of his beer, not quite remembering when he'd switched drinks. "Why do I think you have some kind of devious plan?"

"Because I do." She grinned at him. "Quite cunning. I've been watching you all night, and I suspect you're better than me." Her grin widened. "But you've been drinking quite a bit more, too."

"So you think we'll be well matched?"

"I've always thought so." She picked up the cue. "Want to break?"

He was flustered. "Be my guest."

She did, and he took the first shot, claiming stripes, then sat back to watch. Her first shot was cautious, but by her third, she'd clearly remembered some old confidence.
He stood opposite her as she bent down, sighting along the cue, and grinned to himself. *Too bad her collar isn't lower cut. I'm missing out on one of the main benefits of playing pool, here.* Still, it was always enjoyable to watch Shepard move, to see that cool concentration in action. He wondered how long he could drag out the game.

Apparently she didn't like what she saw nearly as well, because she circled the table again and parked right in front of him. He shifted sideways enough to see around her. Sure, he'd have a better view of the game if he walked around the table, but…

She leaned over, sighting again, and her pants pulled tight around her hips.

*Yeah, that was definitely worth stayin' put for.* He didn't even bother to hide his grin, that time. Zaeed saw it and the direction of his glance and almost choked on his beer, but Joker didn't care. He was enjoying himself too much. When Shepard sunk her target ball and straightened up, he asked "Commander, care for a wager?"

She circled the table again. "Isn't it a bit late in the game to be coming up with stakes?"

"Aw, just a friendly forfeit, Commander."

"Okay, helmsman. When I win, my next drink's on you." She set up for another shot. "What do you want?"

*I'vegotalist.* Joker grinned, swept away on a wave of recklessness. "If you lose…” he tapped his forefinger against his lips meaningfully.

Shepard's eyebrows shot up, but she didn't say no.

His alcohol-inspired bravery deserted him as abruptly as it arrived. *You just bet your commander a kiss that you'll win a pool game. You are an idiot.* He hoped the brim of his hat was hiding his blush.

He weighed possible outcomes as Shepard walked around the table, weighing her possible shots.

If he won, she'd probably back out of it, which would make him feel like unattractive pond scum. Unless she backed out by claiming regulations, in which case he'd just feel like a total tool. Or she could go through with it (and Shepard being Shepard, she *might*). That was its own problem. She might be aces at playing things cool, but he didn't think he could make it through a kiss without it becoming abundantly clear that he wasn't just teasing. Hell, his heart was beating faster whenever she looked at him. Melting into a puddle of goo seemed like a best-case scenario if he ever got closer.

He glanced around at the still crowded bar. *Shiiit.* If he had to make his pathetic infatuation obvious, it could at least have been somewhere without an audience.

*Shit, Moreau, you are such a lightweight.* That last beer was a bad idea.

Shepard called a cross corner and didn't quite make it.

*That's it,* he realized with a sinking feeling, *I have to lose.* It was the only way to get out of it with his dignity intact. He scowled. Intentionally screwing up went against everything in his nature… especially the part that still *really* wanted that kiss. *Oh well.* His pride had a turn to get used to the idea. Shepard's leave was so awful he wouldn't have to fake a bad shot this time around; there wasn't a good one to take.
Shepard watched as Joker carefully picked his shot and smiled to herself. Joker got the same intent look on his face shooting pool that he did flying. She could watch it all day.

She'd been totally surprised by his suggestion of a forfeit. Keeping the surge of emotions off her face had taken a supreme act of will, but the crew was watching, so she had to maintain some semblance of control. Besides, that was the way you played the game.

Her last shot hadn't done what she wanted, but she wasn't worried. Her opportunity would come. She rolled the beer around her tongue, enjoying the flavor. Her good mood had made it easy to avoid the temptation of anything stronger. The depot had a surprisingly good selection on tap, too.

The balls rolled to a stop and she saw her chance. It was perfect. She squelched her glee and shoved lazily off the table she'd been leaning on, walking around to check the angles as if she hadn't already made her decision.

She checked everything carefully and made the shot.

It was **perfect**. Beautiful. She looked up to see Joker's reaction. His eyes were following the five as it slowly rolled into the corner pocket. He hadn't even noticed that the ricochet had sunk the eight.

*Look around, dammit!* *You just won.*

Surely the desire to grab his shoulders and yell "You WON!" was the beer talking.

She'd forgotten that Zaeed had been watching. The grizzled merc looked at her, then at Joker. "Well, goddamn. I don't believe it." He guffawed. "Looks like you have to pay up, Shepard!"

At that Joker's eyes darted around the table. Shepard waited for the moment of realization. Would he play it smooth or get awkward? He had the capacity for both, and she'd take either. Or she could pay up before he asked… *Fuck, take a deep breath, Shepard, or you'll jump the poor guy on the pool table.*

Joker looked up from the table, shaking his head in disbelief, just as Tali burst into the room, almost crying, "Shepard. Shepard, I have to talk to you!"

*Fuck!* She was angry at the interruption, but there was very real anguish in Tali's voice. She shoved her frustration away and turned resolutely to her friend. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Joker go through a similar transformation, his shock turning into concern. She shrugged in his direction, took Tali's arm, and led her back to the relative privacy of the *Normandy*.

Even if crew quarters had been quiet, Joker knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. With Matthews drunkenly mumbling and Robson's snores amplified by a stuffy nose it was beyond aggravating, so he sought refuge in the empty mess hall.

*If Shepard had won, it would all be easier.* He'd only needed a shot or two to throw the game. He'd thought it was going to plan until he'd heard Massani's laugh. *You have to pay up, Shepard.* That's when he realized the eight-ball was out of sight. He'd stupidly kept his gaze on the table as if a few extra seconds would bring him an idea of what to do.

He'd gotten carried away and he'd screwed up, and he had no idea what Shepard was going to say in the morning, if she said anything. Should he play it up as a joke? The thought made him feel ill.
So did thinking about what the crew were thinking. *I bet they're congratulating her. Dodged a bullet, Shepard, Tali's emergency got you out of kissing the cripple.*

Tali. Shit. How could he be worried about this at all when they were taking his friend to stand trial for treason?

He rested his arms on the table, and his head in his hands. *Shit, shit, shit, shit. You total idiot. You'd gotten more than you deserved, you'd gotten everything back, it was fine, and you had to ruin it by letting yourself fall in, fall in –*

"Love!" boomed out, echoing in the mess-hall, and he jumped in his chair.

"The shit –?" He turned around, looking in vain for the speaker.

"...Unrequited, robs me of my rest."

No, not speaker – *singer.* In the med bay. Chakwas?

"Love! Hopeless love! My ardent soul encumbers –"

That was a new voice.

"Love, nightmare-like, lies heavy on my chest –" Chakwas continued.

"And weaves itself into my midnight slumbers!"

When he checked over his shoulder he could just see Mordin's horns silhouetted in the med-bay, a distance from Chakwas's less distinctive shape. They continued their surprising duet, alternating verses now. Relieved that they were clearly singing for the hell of it and none of it had been aimed at him, he slumped back down on his hands.

The evening had gone from fun to dismal to surreal.

*I'm going to confront them about this in the morning, he thought, and they're going to look at me sadly and ask if I accidentally licked the drell. And then Mordin will do that knowing-slow-blink thing and ask if this is a recurring problem, and have I often found myself accidentally licking crew-members? And then –*

He looked up at the sound of doors. Miranda stormed out of her quarters and across the mess without acknowledging Joker, barged into the med-bay, and shouted "CEASE THIS RACKET!"

The music came to an abrupt halt.

"Do you have any idea what time it is? Do you have any concept of the importance of our task? A task that requires rest, might I add, rest uninterrupted by – by – by random musical interludes! Do you have the foggiest notion of how absolutely ridiculous you look? Clearly not. And I'm not going to explain it to you, because I just want you to shut the hell up so I can get some sleep!"

There was a moment's shocked pause, and then she added in the same tone, "And what the hell is a 'bathing machine'?"

Miranda stalked out of the med-bay without waiting for an answer. She paused at the table and scowled down at Joker. "And what are you doing?"

Joker raised his head from his hands. "Going insane," he said glumly.
"Do it quietly," she growled, and stormed back into her room.

Chapter End Notes

For those not familiar with the works of Gilbert & Sullivan, Mordin and Chakwas are singing 'the Nightmare Song' from Iolanthe.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shepard stepped from the elevator into the CIC, a mug of coffee in her hand and a jumble of emotions in her head. She'd spent the early part of the night awake, lying in bed with the shutters open, staring out at the stars.

She'd almost decided that she was chasing shadows, that the occasional times Joker would rise to her bait were only characteristic playfulness, not interest. Half the time they talked in the course of their normal duties his 'see ya' sounded almost bored, and they'd shared enough real conversation off-duty by now that if he'd wanted to say something, surely he would have. And you still have no idea what his tastes are, what his life is outside of work.

His choice of stakes for their pool game had put it all in a new light. The fact that they'd been interrupted before she could pay up just meant she still owed him a kiss. She wouldn't dream of neglecting that debt. The problem was creating the right situation to pay up.

Her eyes flicked towards the cockpit. What'll he have to say this morning?

Before she could go find out, Tali came on deck. The quarian's back was ramrod straight as she walked to Shepard's post, eye-lights not so much as glancing to either side.

That, of course, was the other thing that had kept Shepard up last night: Tali'Zorah had been accused of treason. Treason.

The charge was a mystery. Tali swore she didn't know what was going on, and Rhi didn't doubt her. Her course was clear, regardless; get to the Flotilla as quickly as possible and give Tali whatever support she needed in resolving this mistake. Surely it's a mistake. The idea that Tali had been accused of something so counter to her nature infuriated Shepard. Tali, with her head on her shoulders, her moral compass always firmly in place, her never-ending support… Rhi fully intended to make the higher-ups eat crow for the anguish they were putting her friend through.

Tali was tense as a coiled spring. If they'd been alone, Rhi would have hugged her, but in front of the CIC crew she only nodded in acknowledgment. Tali was putting on a brave face, under that helmet. Shepard wasn't going to take it from her.

"Are you ready, Tal?"

"Sooner rather than later, Shepard." She tried to make it sound like an unimportant chore, but the strain showed in her voice.

Rhi downed the last of her coffee. "I'll go suit up, and we'll get this straightened out."

The quarian fleet was fascinating. If she'd been there under any other circumstances, Shepard would have been thrilled. Just the color was enough to lift her spirits. She was heartily sick of Cerberus black-and-white. Black, white, and gold… there's a metaphor for their morality in there, somewhere. If you're not with us you're against us, and by the way, we're filthy rich. The quarians were bedecked in all the colors of the rainbow, the intricate styling of their suits a counter to the impersonal face-masks.

She couldn't forget that these were the people who'd accused her friend of treason, though. Tali had
always served the fleet first. How could her own people not see that?

*Y’know, you might just be borrowing a bit.* Didn’t she stand in a similar position? *Everything I’ve ever done was serving the Alliance.* Before her old comrades had branded her a traitor she probably would have taken it more calmly. Oh, she’d have gone to the mat for her crew, but it wouldn’t have been so personal. She could have been the even, reasonable influence. *These things happen.*

*Bureaucratic mix-up. Don’t take it too hard.*

*Damn, hearing that would have been annoying. Hell yeah for perspective. At least Tali won’t have to deal with soothing bullshit on top of the other crap.*

She shoved her own feelings down. She could be introspective later – for now, she’d best come to grips with with some points of quarian culture, and fast. Namely, that a quarian's captain was also their legal advocate.

*I’m a marine, not a lawyer, damn it. N7 training didn't cover this.*

Shepard crouched behind a lab bench and reloaded her shot-gun. Sweat was running down her brow and pooling where the helmet padding cushioned her temples. Gunfire pelted the wall behind her. To her left, Tali hunched over her omni-tool, trying to find a chink in the cyber-defences of their enemy.

*Well, I did say I’d rather shoot things than play politics. Should have specified that the things shouldn't shoot back.* Shepard waited for a break in the fire and then vaulted the bench, catching a geth infiltrator in its metal middle with her foot and finishing it with her shotgun.

Damn, she was tired.

She’d been relieved when the admirals sitting in judgment on Tali gave them the option of reclaiming the over-run *Alarei*. They all thought the ship would hold the answers to the ridiculous charge that Tali’Zorah had brought active geth onto the migrant fleet.

They’d found explanations, alright – explanations, a whole *lot* of geth, and the body of Tali’s father. Wrapping her friend into a tight hug while she cried had been the only thing Shepard was certain she’d done right that whole day.

*If I’d known what we'd find here, I'd have had Joker blow the Alarei clean away.* The anguish in Tali’s voice when she discovered her father had been the one to activate the geth had said more than her words had. Now Shepard had to exonerate Tali without any of the evidence that would clear her name. *Right.* Rhi wasn’t entirely sure what to think about her friend's strained relationship with her father, but then, what did she know of fathers? It was enough that it was important for Tali.

*And first we have to get off this hell-ship.* She’d thought they'd cleared a path on their way in, but more geth had come out of nowhere to bar their way. *Either Tali's father collected a lot of geth parts, or they're cobbling each other together out of coffee makers and toaster ovens.*

A heavy clanking down the corridor alerted them to a larger-than-usual platform – *Geth Prime? Dishwasher?* – and she, Garrus, and Tali moved to cover.

Shepard allowed herself a small smile inside her helmet. Tali might be grief-stricken, but she’d locked it away; she was still functioning, still firing with cool efficiency, still part of their team. She was tough. She’d make it.
"Tali, look for a way through that thing's defenses. Garrus, I'll keep it occupied – make your shot count. Ready?" She tried to ignore the sweaty itch on her nose and let loose with her SMG.

Shepard's hope of a shower before the trial recommenced, or even just a breather and bite to eat, had been dashed. They had returned to the Rayya to find the trial already in progress – without its star players. She'd had to make do with a single deep breath before charging back into the (verbal) fray.

*It's probably good they couldn't smell me,* she thought as they waited for the *Normandy*’s airlock to cycle. *Would have ruined everything.* As it was, Tali was off the hook and her father's good name intact. More importantly, she'd seen her own people stand up in her support. The quarian marine she'd served with on Haestrom where they pulled her out of that geth mess; the poor kid who'd been stranded on Freedom's Progress – they were the ones Tali had needed to hear.

Now Tali was quiet, next to her. The cool line of the disinfect beam played over them, marking slow time.

"You can go back to the *Rayya* for a few hours, if you like. I know it's a long time since you've been home."

"I… I just need some time on my own, right now. There's never privacy on the migrant fleet." Tali tried to say it lightly, but her emotional exhaustion was clear as day. "But I *would* like to… nevermind. We'll be leaving shortly, I'm sure."

Rhi reached for Tali's hand and gave it a squeeze. "It's not going to hurt anything if we stay put for a few hours longer. You can still have some time to visit after you've had a rest."

"Thank you, Shepard." She returned the pressure, and then the airlock chimed.

"Thank you, Shepard." She returned the pressure, and then the airlock chimed.

Joker spun around as they exited the airlock. "Tali!" he said happily, "Nice to see they came to their senses." He clucked his tongue. "You sure did it the hard way, though."

Garrus wrenched off his helmet. "I'm sure you'd have had a much better plan," he said drily.

"Yeah, that defense should have been a piece of cake." Joker leaned back to better look down his nose and said pompously, "Ah yes, Geth on the migrant fleet. We have dismissed that claim." He put air-quotes around the word 'geth.'

Funny, but Tali did not need to deal with his antics right now. "Joker –" Shepard started to chide, but to her surprise, Tali giggled, albeit weakly. Rhi shut her mouth.

"I suppose," Tali said thoughtfully, "No matter how bad the politics of the fleet get, they've never gotten *that* bad."

"Right, putting it all in perspective," Shepard sighed. "Never let it be said the council doesn't perform a valuable service." She shook her head. *Damn, I'm cranky.* "Tali, take whatever time you need. We'll stick around until," she glanced at the chrono, "0100. Garrus, Joker," she nodded curt goodbyes and headed off to her cabin and a warm shower.

In the elevator, she remembered her earlier plan to have Joker come up for a bit of a private meeting and tossed it aside. She was exhausted in every way. Better to wait a day than make some stupid mistake because she was tired. They were on the same ship, anyway – it's wasn't like he could *go* anywhere.
Joker mulled all through dinner, the intensity of his glower affording him some degree of privacy at the crowded table. When Gardner made a tray for Kelly to take up to the commander, Joker sank even deeper into his funk.

_Yup, you really f*cked it up._ Bad enough that Shepard had been about to take him to task for his quip to Tali. She hadn't stopped by for their usual pre-mission chat, either. Now she was taking her meal in her quarters, breaking her habit of joining first shift at mess.

_Dude, she's not doing it just to avoid you. You're not that important._ That didn't let him off the hook, though. He'd over-stepped. Of course, she'd certainly teased. He swallowed a wash of bitter anger. That wasn't important. He'd show he was professional. Clear the air. Move on.

He spent the rest of the meal thinking of what, exactly, to say. He dragged out his dinner, but by the time he was done brushing the last of Gardner's slop from his teeth, he had to admit that he wasn't going to think of anything better by waiting.

"EDI, where's the Commander right now?"

"In her quarters." The AI paused. "Would you like me to page her for you?"

"No, no, I'll just, um…" _Just what? Embarrass yourself?_ No. This was the right thing to do. He tried to keep that firmly in mind as he made his way to the elevator.

The ride up to deck one went far too quickly. He ran over what he'd prepared to say while he waited for EDI to inform Shepard of his presence.

"Come in."

Shepard was sitting at her desk, attention on the terminal. When he entered she stretched and turned around, her eyes red from too much data or too little sleep. She smiled up at him wearily.

He stood awkwardly, looking at a spot on the wall behind her so he didn't have to meet her eyes, and her slight smile changed into a slight frown.

"Something the matter, Joker?"

"Commander. I –" _You just rehearsed this, idiot._ "I need to apologize." His voice sounded flat.

She frowned. "For…?"

Shit, she was going to make him spell it out. He kept his eyes fixed on the spot behind her. "I crossed a line last night, and I'm sorry."

"Joker –"

He spoke right over whatever she'd been about to say. If she interrupted him he'd never manage; it was hard enough to get this out at all. "I know I was out of line, and I accept full responsibility for my own behavior."

"But you – I," he took a quick breath, "feel like, er," _shit,_ "recently there've been a few times where it felt like you were flir – er, things I'm sure were just friendly, but it's been hard for me to take that way, and it makes it harder, er," _Shit, you idiot, did you just say that?_ – to focus. I know it's all in good fun and I shouldn't take it seriously, and I have a lot of respect for you, Commander. I
wouldn't want you to think I thought I could –" He gritted his teeth together. "It would help me not make an ass of myself if you'd stop. Even if it wasn't your intention, I don't like being teased."

"Jeff!"

His perfect not-Shepard focus point disappeared when she abruptly stood up from her chair, leaving him staring at her chest until he corrected in horror. His gaze lit on a green cocktail umbrella, tucked in the wing of the model SR1 behind her.

"Jeff. I didn't realize, I never meant –"

Of course she didn't. He'd known that, but hearing it was still hard. "Of course you didn't mean it, and I don't mean to imply you did, or anything. I know you'd never think of me that way, but I feel… lead on. It's distracting."

He dared a look back at her face. Her normally controlled expression was shot, but he couldn't read the varied emotions. Surprise? Consternation? No, she looked horrified. The bitter anger resurfaced. Yeah, Shepard. How's it feel to realize the crippled guy has a libido, too?

"No!" Her voice rang in the small space. "I never meant to be a tease." She didn't flinch from looking at his face. Her eyes were unreadable again, but her jaw was clenched. "I'm sorry, Joker. I've put you in a very awkward situation. It was an abuse of my command and a betrayal of your trust. You've been so – I – " She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before opening them again. "I promise you, I'll behave professionally in future." He could feel the tension she radiated.

"But first I'm going to abuse my command one more time. Unless you want to leave right now."

What the shit? He stayed rooted to the floor, victim of his own curiosity. What the hell is she talking about?

She gave him a moment. When she saw he wasn't about to bolt, she said "Don't move," and crossed the space to him in one long stride.

He couldn't have moved if he wanted to. Surprise glued him to the spot. She was close, too close, so close he could smell the soap of her recent shower and the heady smell of Shepard.

She raised one hand and brushed it lightly down his cheek, then murmured, "Thank you. For everything," and he felt her lips warm on his.

His heart tried to fly up his esophagus. She lingered just a moment, but before his hind-brain could break through his shock and tell him kiss her back! she broke it off and walked stiffly away, turning her back to him.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was hard, controlled. "I – it won't happen again."

Did she just – she just – holy shit! His brain spun desperately, trying to make sense of the changing situation. Had he just thrown away something he didn't know he'd had?


Now her voice shook, the tiniest bit. "Please… please go." She didn't turn around.

"No." His voice was firm, now, all hesitance forgotten. He stepped up behind her. "It won't happen again?"
She shook her head 'no', almost imperceptibly.

He reached out and touched her shoulder, gently pulling her back around to face him. "Even if I ask very nicely?"

She blinked. Otherwise her face was a cold mask, all hint of emotion locked away inside. "So very hard to read – but I'm good at it." Commander. Shepard. I have to know. Did you, did you mean that? Not the words, the…"

She nodded slowly.

His hand was still on her shoulder, arms' length, afraid to get too close. "Really? Not just –" He didn't know 'not just what'.

She nodded again. "Of course." She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. A horrible thought shattered his growing sense of wonder. "Wait, was that about the stupid bet?"

Shit, of course she'd be just that kind of honorable, damn it!

A hint of something flashed in her eyes. "Joker," she said, "I threw the pool game."

All he could do was stupidly ask, "Why?"

The mask was starting to melt, a hint of a sad smile showing through the cold barrier. "Because I wanted to kiss you." Her tone of voice added an unspoken 'you idiot,' but it was a kind one.

Events of the past few weeks started to resort themselves in his mind. "So, all the everything – the thing about pilots, the song – did you actually listen to the lyrics?"

She rolled her eyes. "I always listen to the lyrics."

"But that means… "But, Shepard, it's… it's me. I'm a – a broken smart-ass. Why?"

"You don't go for the easy questions, do you?" She was quiet for a moment, her eyes never leaving his face. When she spoke, her voice was quiet. "I've never really had a home, you know? Just places I happened to be at the time. The streets, the academy, the current ship… The Normandy is as close as I've ever gotten." Her firm look faltered, and she looked to one side, then the other, then closed her eyes. "When we're on the ground and everything's going to hell I know you're up there doing your best to get us back, talking me in. You're the voice of home." She opened her eyes. "And you make me laugh. I can't stand all the earnest bullshit. Our position's bad enough without treating it seriously all the damn time."

He stared at her, trying to keep his mouth from hanging open. So this is how it feels when your world does a Crazy Ivan. She'd meant it. It was the one thing he'd never considered. He took a deep breath and tried to slow his heart rate. His careful script was shot to hell, replaced by a trembling, buoyant feeling in his chest. Words, words, need words. "This is me asking nicely. Please abuse your command again?"

"Jeff, no." Her voice sounded hollow. "I've already laid more on you than I ever should have. Don't fake this for me."

His brain spun, caught in a trap of his own making, trying to find words to make it all clear to her, trying to figure out what part of his bumbling attempt at professionalism had made her think he
wasn't interested, trying to somehow save the whole stupid situation –

_Wait. Fuck words!_

He took an awkward step closer and kissed her.

He brushed his lips over hers, softly, and felt her breath catch in surprise. Then again, letting his eyes drift closed. She unfroze, gradually, tentatively returning it. He tried not to think about anything but the softness of her mouth, or the warmth of her breath when her lips parted, ever so slightly.

_I am really doing this. I'm really kissing Shepard. It's not just a daydream._ His eyes flicked open – _just to be sure_ – and saw that hers had closed. He slid his hand from her shoulder down her arm and closed his eyes again.

He broke the kiss before he felt entirely liquefied, and said quietly, "Who says it'd be for you?"

It took a long moment for her to come back to herself. So close, he could see the subtle change in tension in her face, the moment she went from lingering in the kiss to –

"Joker…" She shook her head. "You came to ask me to leave you alone." She moved to pull away, but stopped when he didn't release his gentle grip on her arm. "Don't – _don't_ do this because I'm your CO."

"Okay." _That's easy enough to agree to._ "Can I do it because you're an amazing, funny, beautiful woman, who is also willing to put up with me? Because I've been wanting to do that for…" He wasn't sure how long, actually. Since she'd fallen asleep on his shoulder? Since she'd come back to life? Since Therum, over two years ago? He'd been trying to not to think about it for so long he couldn't pinpoint it. "…a long time," he finished lamely. "And it's not a problem I noticed with any of my other commanding officers."

He saw her eyes flash with surprise at the word beautiful. _Do you really not know, Shepard?_ Sure, hers wasn't the kind of face you saw on marketing everywhere, and maybe most people would describe her as 'striking', but they hadn't seen her in action. _You're beautiful._

Her brow creased. "You didn't seem to think that a few minutes ago."

"Shit, no, see, I thought you were… playing. Just joking with me, and I was – I am –," he fumbled for words, and finally mumbled, "a bit too interested to be able to ignore the joke." He reached one hand up and tentatively touched her cheek, felt the slow flip his heart did when she leaned into the gesture like a cat. "It never occurred to me that you might _mean_ it," he whispered.

"I know I'm not the best at subtle hints," she admitted, "But why would you assume…"

His fears still felt more real than this tenuous closeness; he hated to even give them voice. But she'd asked, and like all the other times she'd asked questions that cut just a little too close to home, he found himself answering.

"When you've grown up with," he grimaced, "issues, you get used to being treated a bit like fragile furniture._ That probably didn't make sense._ He groped for a better explanation. "People see the disease first. I'm lucky if I'm treated as 'the guy who's good at his job' and not 'the guy who's disabled _but still_ good at his job', y'know?" He thought abruptly of what he must sound like. "Shit, I didn't mean to whine."

"You're not." Her long fingers brushed his cheek. "I asked. I want to understand."
"Someone hears that you're breakable, they write you off. No longer on the radar, because they figure you must not be able to..." he realized abruptly where that train was headed and felt his cheeks turn red.

Shepard abruptly looked angry, the same wonderful protective fury she'd had when she learned Tali was accused of treason, when she'd fought for Nessie. "Who says that?"

He snorted. "No one," he shook his head, "No one says it. It's an assumption. People don't even think about it."

"But -"

"Hey, I'm no going to argue their case, I know they're wrong!" He chuckled sourly at the absurdity of it. "But you asked why."

"We-ell, I can't swear I haven't thought about... details," she looked at him slyly, "a bit. But I couldn't imagine anything we couldn't handle with a bit of stubbornness and creativity. You rescued my ass out of a volcano and safely dropped a mako where people said it couldn't be done. Then I drove it through a mass relay. What are two qualities we both seem to have in spades?"

Just thinking about the implications of Shepard 'thinking about details' made the room three degrees warmer. Thank goodness fatigue pants were roomy.

She was still waiting for an answer, so he suggested, "Delusions of godhood and a poorly developed sense of self preservation?"

She laughed, a real laugh that drained away the tension from her face and lit up her brown eyes. "Try again."

He'd try anything for another laugh like that. "Fondness for cocktail umbrellas and a knack for pissing off our superiors?"

She jabbed his chest with her finger. "How did you ever get such good marks in school?"

"Okay," he allowed, "maybe stubbornness and creativity?"

"Damn straight."

His grin broadened. Caught you! "And I thought you said Wrex drove the Mako?"

"Shut up and kiss me, helmsman."

Who could backtalk an order like that?

With no qualms, this time, he leaned in and kissed her. One hand came up to cup her cheek, thumb gliding over the faint scars there. She returned it immediately, mouth moving against his, opening to share breath, and he drank her in, as if he could fill that odd, awed space she'd opened in his chest. Her lips were warm and insistent on his.

When she closed the last little distance between their bodies his knees went weak, but her arms were around him, hand on his back, strong and stable as rock.

Chapter End Notes
Happy New Year, everyone!
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

In which everyone should get some time to be a bliss ninny, but there's still a ship to be run.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Joker walked from the head to crew-quarters as if his feet didn't touch the ground. His recently-broken leg still ached, and his gait wasn't any more even than before, but as far as his head was concerned the Normandy's artificial gravity had stopped working when Shepard kissed him, and it still hadn't kicked back in.

He was still grinning like a loon. He knew he was grinning like a loon, because he'd noticed it in the mirror over the sink when he'd checked to make sure he didn't have black lipstick smudges. He'd thought if he did have lipstick marks, he would have grinned like a loon, but there weren't any – and he grinned like a loon anyway.

Huh. Her make-up's probably designed to the same military specs as her armor. Not that he could picture her buying make-up, but then, before tonight he'd never have pictured her kissing him, either. Well, that was a lie. He'd pictured it pretty frequently, he'd just never thought it would actually happen.

He paused a moment outside the door to flick on the light function of his omnitool. Most of the shift would be asleep, and even if a small and very stupid part of him wanted to sing as loudly as Mordin and Chakwas, he didn't want to wake anyone. The bunk room was oddly silent, lacking the usual snores and the rustle of people turning in their racks, but the hush didn't really register on him until he heard the muffled giggle.

Uh oh. For a second he thought that they all knew where he'd been and what he'd been doing and had been gossiping, but that was ridiculous. There must be some other obnoxious surprise in store.

He pretended he hadn't heard. The dim orange light of his omnitool revealed nothing unexpected on his bunk, so he sat down on the edge to pull off his boots and strip out of his uniform, happy to exchange the thick material for lighter t-shirt and shorts. He hung his hat neatly by the headboard. He took his time about massaging out the stiff spots in his injured leg, too, letting the silence grow more strained while he surreptitiously scanned his surroundings for anything out of place.

Finally he gave up and crawled into bed. He stretched out, adjusted his pillow, rolled over – and then he saw it.

The hush was practically funereal.

Joker clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the bottom of the bunk above him.

"Y'know," he began conversationally, "I took down a reaper. Flew the Normandy in under it's nose after the barriers went down and shot its black-metal heart."
He was certain they were all awake, now. He'd pitched his voice to carry, and if anyone had actually been trying to sleep they'd have given him an earful. They're wondering where the hell I'm going with this. He grinned in the dimness.

"I was on the ship when plant zombies started tearing at our locks, moaning, while we all hoped Shepard would survive long enough to kill this whole unique mind-controlling-plant species and save our asses. Then she commits her bit of horticultural genocide and comes back slathered in its guts, and zombie guts, and maybe some human guts, smelling like the worst thing a varren ever puked, and I held my nose and got us the hell out of there."

He thought for a moment and added, "That was after flying through the errupting volcano."

The bunkroom was silent, his audience enrapt.

"I watched people I've known for ten years fall to the geth. Ships piloted by people I was in flight school with, exploding into fire and metal confetti. Then a month later, the collectors did the same to the SR1. Now I've saved all your butts from the same ship. I'm working for my undead commander, and our next stop is the center of the fucking galaxy. Given all that, do you know what I really don't need in my life?"

In the total silence that greeted his question, the sound of the tape ripping as he tore the poster off the bottom of the bunk sounded as loud as gunfire.

"I don't need Hotchkin's damn Blasto pin-up. That's what I don't need."

There was a short, sharp bark of laughter from Robson, above him. Across the room, Patel got out "Sorry, guys, he definitely wins," through a storm of giggles, while Hotchkins pleaded "Don't rip it, Joker!"

He briefly considered securing the poster in his locker and asking Kasumi or Tali to put it some place really bizarre in the morning, but he was still on cloud nine, and it made him uncharacteristically magnanimous. "Wouldn't dream of it," he said. "G'night."

The good-natured laughter subsided, and a more normal quiet developed, full of deep breathing and muffled sound. When Robson's piercing snore started up, Joker didn't even make his habitual scowl-and-groan – though he did make sure his ear plugs were well seated.

In that silence, he was finally alone again with his thoughts, and better yet, his recent memories.

When he closed his eyes he could still feel Shepard's lips warm on his, her tongue in his mouth. Could hear the small, distraught moan she'd made when EDI informed them that Grunt had broken three storage crates and a crewman's leg and she was needed in the cargo deck immediately. Which was why he was back in crew-quarters, careening between states of utter disbelief, sweet frustration, and giddy bliss. He cursed Grunt and the hapless crewman who'd gotten on his bad side, and EDI for delivering the message. They'd made good use of the all-too-brief elevator ride, though, the time limit and the somewhat public place adding an extra urgency to their kisses, a hungrier edge to soft lips and gently exploring tongues.

He wanted to go back and have more time, to talk more and to touch a lot more, to give this momentous development the time it deserved – but he didn't regret a moment of the wonderful, amazing, frenzied kissing that had actually happened. He didn't wish he could re-do it; he just wanted to do it more. He'd been starved of touch for so long he'd almost forgotten how good it felt to hold and be held. The warm, solid feel of her hands on his back had been enough to make him shiver. Her tongue in his mouth enough to make him hard. His body reacted to the remembered
feel of hers pressed against him, even through their uniforms.

Commander Shepard kissed me. Kissed. Me.

Eventually, he fell asleep with a smile on his face.

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Rhi paused before she entered the elevator, schooling her expression to reflect the businesslike demeanor her crew expected and deserved of their commander, and not the euphoria that danced in her heart.

You're 29, she told herself (a little voice in her head said '31,' which would have been irritating if it hadn't been Joker's). You've already been dead once. Grow the hell up.

She didn't want to, though.

It hadn't gone according to plan, but then, nothing in the last few days had. Or last few weeks, really. Or since she'd woken up. Or, more realistically, since she'd touched the prothean beacon. Or perhaps since batarians had invaded Elysium nine years ago. No, since she'd taken Ness to the hospital. That had definitely been the start of things Not Going According To Plan.

This is the best totally-not-a-plan yet.

The elevator ride didn't help. She couldn't see it without remembering how she'd backed Joker against the wall and (carefully) leaned into him, or the hot-sweet taste of his mouth on hers. When she'd first kissed him he'd been too shocked to respond, and it'd been just a hair more exciting than kissing a bulkhead, but damn, he'd made up for that fast. She didn't know what she'd expected – shyness? She didn't exactly know how extensive his romantic past was – but Joker was amazing with his mouth.

And that was only kissing.

She looked at the spot in the elevator again and shivered. Damn, girl. You'd think you'd been pure as a fucking angel since you were revived, instead of making good use of your friend-with-batteries. Considering her history included her fair share of one-night-stands and purely physical flings, the fact that kissing had her this excited was something of a novelty. Maybe it was the new skin – skin that had been so damn sensitive those first few days after she'd awoken in Miranda's lab. Maybe it was the length of time since she'd been with anyone – a year now, even if she didn't count the time on the Lazarus table.

Maybe she just really liked Joker.

Because it wasn't just kissing. It was kissing her pilot, who'd been there for her even when she'd no reason to expect it, who always spoke his mind but hid his real self so deep it was a constant lure to her curiosity, who'd been brave enough to confront his commanding officer about her truly bad behavior – and then been willing to indulge it.

Kissing him had probably been unethical, but she didn't regret it in the least. Hell, if she hadn't been tired and tense, she probably wouldn't have had the necessary amount of Oh-Fuck-It to pull it off. Still, when the combat situation was bad and you saw your one chance slipping away, you damn well took it. Besides, she'd rationalized, she'd owed him for the pool game. He could hardly say he hadn't asked for it.

The doors slid open on the CIC, and she stopped to check in with Kelly and Jacob before heading
down to the crew deck for coffee. The Normandy was underway, and she had time to see how Tali was holding up before she settled down to actual work.

If she could settle down enough to work, that is.

*If you can't, this was a really, really bad idea.*

Sobering thought, that. She poured a cup of coffee and grabbed a plate. Joker didn't appear in the mess in the ten minutes it took her to inhale her breakfast. Probably good – if she didn't see him until she was into her routine, it'd be easier not to give anything away. She topped up her coffee and went down to engineering.

Tali was already hard at work, Gabby beside her. The quarian had been pulling double duty ever since Donnelly had been caught in the bomb, and with that followed by her trial, she had every right to be exhausted and upset, but the heavy work load seemed to have the opposite effect on her. Being busy suited Tali down to the ground. She and Gabby were birds of a feather, in that regard. The other engineer had been back at work while her bruises were still deep blue-purple, helping shoulder part of her injured partner's load.

"Shepard!" Tali said. "Good morning."

"How you doin, Tal?" Rhi asked. Gabby, ever sensitive, found a task at the farther workstation to give them some space.

"I'm okay, Shepard. I mean… I still have a lot to think about, about my father. But I'm alright."

"Glad to hear it. Tali was Normandy."

Tali bobbed her head. "Shepard, I wanted to say… thank you. For the extra time on the Rayya. For everything else, too, of course, but… I didn't know it, but I really needed that."

"Of course."

Tali's voice brightened. "I got you something!" She turned away before Shepard could respond and pulled a wrapped package out of a locker. It was big, floppy, and neatly wrapped, and Tali thrust it into her hands.

"Tali, you didn't need to – you shouldn't have. You know I'd do my best to help you no matter what. Hell, I'm just happy you're here." Rhi looked at the package and then her friend in confused pleasure. People didn't just get her things. She didn't know how to react.

"Shepard, I know," Tali said with fond exasperation, "I wanted to – and I think you'll like it." She bounced a little on her toes. "Come on, open it."

Rhi juggled package and coffee-cup for a moment and set the latter down on a console. She kept looking up at Tali while she picked off the tape, searching the blank mask for some kind of clue. Finally she tore the paper aside.

It was fabric, in the quarian style, fine weaving laced with curving forms made of grouped parallel lines, the soft violet-blue of dawn patterned with the deep rich blue of midnight. Shepard ran her hand over it. Whatever they used for their fabrics, it was exquisitely soft. "Tali," she breathed, "It's beautiful."

"I know how you feel about these colors everywhere." Tali gestured with one three-fingered hand at the black-and-white of Shepard's uniform. "And if there's one thing we do well, it's color."
"It's gorgeous." Rhi ran her hand over the fabric again. What looked like two colors was actually many more, threads of a multitude of hues blending together to create that rich effect. As far as one could get from flat Cerberus black and white. "But, um… what is it?"

"A bedspread. I didn't think you'd suddenly want to start dressing like a quarian." Tali laughed, delighted. "I take it you like it?"

At a loss for words, Shepard wrapped Tali in hug by way of response, package squished between them. "I'm glad you're alright, Tal. And I'm glad you're still here."

Tali squeezed back. "Me too. Now get back to your work so I can get to mine. We're still down a worker, and these engines won't take care of themselves."

"Yes, ma'am," Shepard teased, and she went off to drop the blanket in her quarters before returning to the crew-deck to look in on Ken Donnelly.

Donnelly had come out of surgery while they were still on Omega, waiting for intel on Trex's whereabouts. The battered engineer had woken bleary with pain, medication, and the after-effects of anesthesia, but he had awoken. There'd been an anxious few days while he did little more than moan, but when he started complaining about how the back brace cramped his style and tried to convince Chakwas of the medical virtues of whiskey, Shepard had breathed a sigh of relief. His injuries certainly hadn't changed his personality – though she suspected that Chakwas wished they had.

The door to the medbay slid open on an unexpectedly full view of the engineer. Shepard put her fingers to the bridge of her nose and growled, "Donnelly."

"S'not my fault I'm convalescin'," he said cheerfully.

Shepard had seen a lot of her people go through the medbay. One thing they all had in common was an intense desire to get out of the flimsy hospital gowns and back into real clothes as soon as they possibly could. Donnelly seemed to be the one exception to the rule.

Hospital gowns opened at the back, of course, but did it really have to be that open?

The engineer turned slowly to face her, and the unexpected full moon waned. He kept one hand on the nearest bed for support, and grinned. "See? I'm even getting' around on my own pins, now!" He was indeed up and about – with the help of the bed, a cane, and the watchful doctor.

"God, take him away," Chakwas said, and flung her hand to her forehead dramatically. "Ach, y'love the company, woman. And you needed the audience for your little duet night before last."

"…Duet?" Shepard ventured.

"Oh, aye, the doc and the mad scientist gave a little show the other night."

Rhi raised an eyebrow at Chakwas. "You're full of surprises, doc."

"Hidden depths, dear, hidden depths." She smiled. "Mr. Donnelly, as you can see, is doing quite well considering the spinal damage. I expect him to make a full recovery."
"I'm right here, ye daft old woman."

"A fact I keep trying to suppress, Ken."

"It'll be good to see you up and about again, Donnelly," Shepard said, and added, "And in uniform."

"But it breathes better than a kilt!"

"That was an order, engineer."

His complaints rang in her ears all the way to the elevator.

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A light on his display warned Joker that the commander was on deck. He kept his eyes on his work – he certainly wasn't going to crane his head around like a love-sick puppy.

He did check the CIC cams. He was only human.

Shepard was standing near the galaxy map, talking with Miranda and looking her normal, put-together professional self. Seeing her now it was hard to imagine her as having a sexual or romantic side at all. Her voice when she asked for a status update was crisp and controlled. An hour later, she requested a whole handful of reports – not the day-to-day busywork Miranda was always on about, but a far more interesting set of hypotheticals – for a meeting the next morning. She still hadn't come up to visit him, and Her voice gave nothing away. She was the Commander to the hilt, this morning.

"EDI," he asked, "d'you remember saying Shepard was a bad actor?"

"I am incapable of 'forgetting' unless data is intentionally deleted, Mr. Moreau. My full statement was an observation to the effect that Shepard is a rather poor actor outside of a few known roles. May I ask why?"

"Of course!" Well, 'near-emotionless commander' is certainly a roll she knows well. Stop worrying.

"It would be customary to have answered the implied question, Mr. Moreau. I believe you are being 'annoyingly literal.'"

"Pot, kettle. I learned it from you, Thing."

EDI blinked twice, then asked, "Mr. Moreau, why did you ask me to repeat my earlier statement about Shepard's acting ability?"

He snorted. "I said you could ask. I didn't say I'd answer you. Now, about those simulations – I want to see what we could do if we threw a gravity well into the mix…"

The strategic simulations kept him interested well into the boring travel shift. Finally, he heard Shepard – Rhi? – Commander Shepard, you're on duty – walk up behind him. He tensed.

Her hand fell, not on his shoulder, but on the back of his chair. Like it always did.

"How we doin', Joker?"

Keeping his voice casual took all his concentration. He rattled off their speed and ETA, then added in the same business-like tone, "and I'm afraid I may be delusional."
"Hmm," she said dryly, "Could affect the mission. Better come talk to me after you get off shift."

"Aye aye, Commander."

And that was it. He glanced at the clock as she walked away. Only five hours thirty minutes left of his shift. Holy shit, what was he going to do? What was he going to say? *Just show up at your commander's door, hey. I'm pretty sure we were kissing last night, and you seemed to enjoy it, could we do that again? How about a date? I've got a bunk underneath Snoring Champion Robson and two seats in the common mess hall, it'll be great!*

Yesterday, trying to plan how to get distance from her with minimal loss of dignity, he'd thought he couldn't have gotten more nervous. He'd been wrong.

He checked the clock. Five hours, twenty four minutes.

He went back to the simulations, only to be interrupted by EDI.

"Busy, Thing!"

"Mr. Moreau. Are you aware that you are… humming?"

"I was?"

"Indeed. It is difficult to be certain considering your unreliable sense of pitch, but over the last fifteen minutes I have collected enough data to run a match test on available audio files. You appear to be trying to produce the melody of 'Paper Moon.'"

"Appear to be trying to produ – You are really a downer, Thing. Jeez. Kick a guy when he's up."

"This is interesting, as I have not be able to find a fifteen minute long version of the song in question."

"Yeah, well. I forgot how the bit after the 'canvas sky' goes. There's a tree or something."

"'Muslin tree.' Please do not hum."

*Four hours, 39 minutes. No humming. Right.*

He sang instead. Quietly. *'Cause it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me...*

EDI didn't interrupt again.

—

Four hours and 53 minutes later, he slouched outside Shepard's cabin door, still unsure how to enter, what to say. Finally he asked EDI to announce his presence, not because he'd found his bravery, but because anything would be less pathetic than having the security vid show he'd been dithering outside Shepard's door for an hour.

Shepard stopped an awkward two meters away and smiled at him."Joker."

*Is it possible she doesn't know what to do next, either? That's... kinda cute.* His hesitance had vanished at the sight of her smile. "You wanted to see me, Com-man-der?" he drew out her title to make it sound insolent. "And my delusions, of course."

"Mostly you," she said, nodding towards the seating area, "But tell me about them, too."
He tried not to look at the bed as he followed her invitation down to the couch. It was harder than it sounded; not only was it decadently huge for a frigate, but it was blue. He could've sworn the covers were white like every other textile on the ship. Don't stare at her bed, jack-ass.

"Delusions, Joker?" she prompted.

"Oh, y'know, remembering things that probably didn't happen." He shifted on the seat and glanced at the ceiling, idly scratching his ear. "Things that aren't really appropriate for someone in my position to be thinking about."

Her expression froze, becoming instantly more reserved.

_Shit. She thinks I want out! Wrong thing to say, wrong, wrong..."_For a symptom of oncoming madness, they were... well, I think I'd rather not be sane. Sorry. I'm, er, having trouble with words at the moment. Madness, you know."

She leaned forward a bit, arms on her knees, eyes on his, and murmured "So show me."

It was a long way to lean – he should have sat closer – so he had plenty of time to worry that if he really _was_ mad he'd be spaced for presumption, but her eyes drifted shut and her lips parted in anticipation.

It was chaste compared to the hungry exploration EDI had interrupted the night before. He kissed her gently, not tentative but sweet, lips brushing hers once, twice, three times... and then her head hit the brim of his hat, knocking it askew, and his eyes opened.

He leaned back, searching for a reaction. Her lips remained parted for a moment, and then her eyes opened, warm and brown.

"I like this madness." She shifted closer. "Why're you so sure you're delusional?"

"Well," he said, "If it was a fantasy, I'd have been _way_ more suave, and if it was a dream, I probably would have ended up running naked through space-station corridors chased by a pink varren and looking for my homework."

"And why can't it be real?" Her voice was low and throaty, and her leg warm against his.

He swallowed. "Well, it seems pretty unlikely." He took his hat off and ran a flustered hand through his hair, then realized how awful it must look.

Before he could put his cap back on Shepard intercepted his hand and turned it over in hers. The white finger-splint was stark against her palm. She frowned at it. "I think I lost track of what was 'likely' when I woke from the dead. Lost that, my temper, two years, and apparently my alliance officer ethics. Didn't lose my crush on my pilot, though." She winked. "So forget likely. Care to think about what you _want_, instead?"

"I don't have to _think_ about it. I've already thought about it a lot. With visuals and everything."

She said, "Joker, I'm being serious," but the corner of her mouth twitched upward, and her eyes were dancing. "Hell, even civilians frown on this kind of thing, I _am_ still your boss. And there are good reasons for that rule, which we both know." She sighed. "But damn it, I have a hard time giving a shit about Cerberus regs."

"Have you actually read 'em?" He turned his hand over, but the splint kept him from twining his fingers with hers.
"Ha. Nope. Have you?"

"Nah. I think Jacob might have."

"Huh? Why bring up Jacob?"

"Oh, just that I think he's the only one. It came up one night at lights-out, and it turns out everyone pretty much chucked the binder in the bottom of their locker."

"...Miranda?" Shepard shook her head. "Of course not. She's pretty sure she makes the rules. Why read 'em?" She looked at him sideways. "But you're still evading the point. Inherent imbalance of power and all that."

"Inherent imbalance of power my ass. I could just fly away and leave you planet-side if you ever irritated me."

"What?"

"You know I'm enough of a jack-ass to say 'no' in the worst possible way if I wanted to, and we both know I'm just too damn good at my job for you to take revenge by killing me in my sleep." He grinned. "Commander."

He'd shocked her into laughing, but she winced theatrically at the title. "Commander?"

"Rhiii." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I want to try this, and believe me, I didn't think of it just because you brought it up. You've been keeping me up nights for weeks. At least." Maybe years. "Now..." he turned towards her and slipped his unbroken left hand around her waist. "What'd you say about an old crush on your pilot?"

She laughed and kissed him. "What'd you say about pink varren and homework?"

"Hey, I don't explain the stupid recurring dreams, I just have 'em." He pushed her back against the arm of the couch and leaned over her. He was wonderfully conscious of the heat of her body beneath him, the easy laughter in her brown eyes. "We've run into all the nightmare fuel anyone could ever want, but it's always a late assignment when I was twelve or some shit."

"I'd think you'd be happy for that." She shifted enough to pull her legs up onto the couch, bending the one on the outside to keep him from falling off and stretching the other out behind him.

He moved to take better advantage of the space she'd made. "Are you kidding? My sixth grade teacher was fucking terrifying." His words were muffled against her skin.

"Awesome. Maybe she – ohh –" she rolled her head back as he brushed his lips along her neck. "Mm. Maybe she can fight the collectors," she finished.

"That is the best plan ever." He brought his attention back to her wide, inviting lips, and ran his tongue along the bottom one. "Then we could focus on important things."

She didn't answer – unless catching his bottom lip gently in her teeth was an answer.

He was happy to respond in kind. He lost himself in her, in the soft warmth of her kisses, the strength of the leg against his side, the soft sounds of pleasure she made. Her hand had found its way up underneath his shirt, caressing fingers sending radiating heat through him. He couldn't quite reciprocate – he was a lot more stable if he leaned on both arms – but he managed to pull her collar aside enough to lay a line of kisses along the end of her collar bone until Rhi ran her hand
around his neck and up through his short hair, pulling him back up for a deeper kiss. He was intensely aware of everywhere they touched, especially the heat where their hips met. He let her body take more of the weight off his arms, encouraged by the subtle pressure of her hand on his back.

"Commander Shepard," EDI's synthesized voice interrupted his bliss, "There appears to have been a slight error in one of the standard navigation functions, resulting in an undetected diversion from our scheduled course. Ms. Mercer requests the assistance of Helmsman Moreau."

The AI's voice had never sounded more grating.

"Fuuuck…" Shepard hissed. The hand on his head relaxed a little, but didn't drop. When she opened her eyes he saw frustration equal to his own.

"Damn it." He took a deep breath to get his voice under control. "EDI, how 'slight'?

"The initial error was well within parameters, but it has now been compounded over some hours."

The warmth of Rhi's body under him was the most important thing in the world. He struggled to care about ships and space travel and his damn job instead. "The shit? Just tell Mercer to get us back on course."

"She expressed concern at the possibility of the error recurring, and is in some distress."

"She's in some distress?" He squeezed his eyes shut in frustration. She does not know distress.

"Poor kid. You better go sort it out." Shepard's arms tightened around his back, making going anywhere impossible. "This is part of proving the regs wrong, I suppose." With one final full body shudder that made parting even harder, she let go and gently pushed him to his feet.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the late chapter. I lost power a few days ago due to heavy snowfall in my area, and my planned one-day-delay stretched out to a few days of hunkering near the fire, playing music in the dark. I hope the chapter is no less enjoyable for the wait. I'm dipping my toe into writing slightly steamier scenes, and it's definitely a stretch in a new direction - any feedback on its effectiveness or lack thereof is much appreciated!
Chapter 29

Joker glared at the screen. It didn't make any sense.

There simply wasn't much that could go wrong, on an inter-system shot like this. You just pointed the ship in the right direction and went. Shit, even with old Earth tech they'd been able to get a guy on the moon with only a couple of rocket bursts. Some transports didn't even bother with a full time pilot, just a crew-member double-trained to handle dock-n-lock procedures. Military vessels kept a pilot on watch because of risk of surprise attacks—a risk no one knew better than Joker—not because they might accidentally run into a planet or some shit. Even that was pretty much a waste of man-hours in FTL flight; once ships jumped they were untraceable until they dropped back to normal speeds.

Of course, if there was a small error, at FTL speeds it became a big one, really fast, as Mercer's near panic could attest.

It took a bit under an hour to correct their course, as he had to drop them out of FTL, find a new safe vector, and get the Normandy up to speed again. The extra deceleration and acceleration would cut into their fuel, but it couldn't be helped. It took two hours and a whole lot of help to pinpoint the problem (a rounding error buried layers deep in one of the navigation protocols), and another forty-five minutes to make sure it couldn't happen again. Then there was at least fifteen minutes of reassuring Mercer, who'd clearly expected to be verbally flayed for the mistake.

He scrubbed his hand over his beard and blinked a few times, trying to wet his screen-strained eyes. "Look, Mercer," he almost said 'kid', which was something Shepard would do when she was particularly pleased with one of the junior crew, but stopped himself short, "It was a programming glitch—a rounding error. You didn't do anything wrong, really—with that lurking in the system it's surprising it didn't happen before."

He looked from the sub-helmsman to Tali, called in to consult, and the unspoken thought passed between them: *It's suspicious that it happened. It's suspicious that it didn't happen before.* Mercer, still anxiously regarding the screens, didn't notice the look—nor did Hadley, who was neck-deep in navigational mathematics, still trying to figure out how the glitch had got there in the first place.

Joker winced. It had taken all four of them just to find the damn thing. What if there was something else like that lurking in the Normandy's systems?

"Shit, Mercer, chill. We'll figure it out." His stomach rumbled audibly. "I just need to get some grub." He nodded at Tali. "You?"

She chuckled. "I've been eating the whole time. Benefits of an environmental suit."

"Oh. Right." He looked around the cockpit vaguely. "Well, when they install hamster feeders up here for the pilot, I quit. The crap we get from Gardner is bad enough."

Any thought of seeing if Shepard was in her quarters was forestalled when his stomach rumbled again. "I get it, I get it," he muttered, and punched the elevator button for the crew deck.

Joker smiled when he saw Shepard sitting at the mess table, perusing a data pad and chatting with Garrus. When she saw him she smiled back. The expression there-and-gone so fast he doubted anyone else saw it, but it was still enough to melt away the stress of the last few hours.

Mindful of the half-dozen observers lingering in the mess, he tamped down his grin. To his
surprise someone had actually saved him dinner; two plastic-wrapped trays were waiting in the cooler, and one had his name on it. He popped it in the re-heater for a few minutes and then carried his spoils back to the table.

Shepard looked up from her data pad again. "Hope you appreciate that. Grunt was awfully excited when neither you nor Hadley showed up at mess. Thought he'd get two extra meals – it was quite a disappointment for him."

Joker swallowed his mouthful of maybe-once-potatoes. "Poor baby."

"I let him down gently." She glanced up towards the bow. "What was up?"

"Slight error in the original FTL vector. We're good for now, but Hadley's still trying to figure out how the nav error got in."

Garrus clicked his mandibles. "Should have been caught in the shakedown run."

Joker snorted. "I think this is the shakedown run."

Shepard's lip twitched in bemused agreement. "Seems to be a Normandy pattern. Saving the world right out of the gate."

"But it is odd it hasn't come up before," Garrus insisted. "Could it have been externally introduced?"

"Shit, Garrus, I'm not the security tech." Joker's head hurt, despite the magical analgesic properties of Shepard's smile. "Talk to Kasumi. Or EDI. Or, er, you. I don't think so, though."

Shepard waved a hand idly at Garrus, which must have been some ass-kicking-squad code for 'let the guy eat his dinner before he dies of starvation,' because the turian sat back and stopped asking him questions. Rhi turned back to her data pad, reading in companionable silence. Totally professional. He could have thought he'd imagined their whole interrupted episode… if her booted toes didn't keep 'accidentally' brushing his under the table.

The third time it happened, he looked up and caught the tiniest twist of a grin on her face, though her attention was still clearly on her reading.

"Work?" he asked.

Garrus had been perusing something on his omnitool, but he laughed at that. "Unfortunately not. She's planning on repairing that hideous death machine."

Given that most of Garrus' and Shepard's daily equipment, the entire contents of the armory, and probably half of Mordin's lab fell under the general heading 'hideous death machines,' that didn't really narrow it down. Shit, without much poetic license at all you could call Garrus and Shepard themselves death machines –though she, at least, was far from hideous.

Shepard came to his rescue, tipping the data pad towards him so he could make out a schematic for a motorcycle – presumably one of the bikes from that memorable encounter with Trex. He'd been so wowed by the bad-ass vision of Shepard on a motorcycle he'd almost forgotten she'd brought two back onto the Normandy.

"Of course," Garrus drawled, "I wouldn't be worried if there was only one. But no, she had to bring back both." He shook his head, the affected human gesture looking out of his place on his alien form. "Don't think you're going to get me on one of those again."
Don't worry, Garrus," Shepard chuckled, "I pretty well trashed one of 'em with that last charge."
"And yet you had me drag it along anyway."
"Hangar queen?" Joker asked.
She cocked an eyebrow. "Hangar-what now?"
"Hangar queen. Old aviation term – grounded plane kept around to be stripped for parts."
"Nice. Then yeah, it's a hangar queen."
"Scavenging? Tali should be here. She'd be so proud." Garrus cocked his head to one side. "Of
course, then she'll realize you want her to fix it, and she'll be annoyed…"
"If I wanted her to fix it, I wouldn't be reading the manual. Tali has better things to do."
"Oh.You're going to try to fix it? She won't be annoyed. She'll be terrified."
"Hmph. You wound me. I used to get 'em back running with old plumbing pipes and baling wire.
I'm sure I can figure it out again."
Joker stared at her in surprise. Shepard was many things – beautiful, deadly, surprisingly well-read,
tough as nails, a really phenomenally fun kisser – but 'mechanically inclined' had never seemed to
be one of them. "You used to fix motorcycles?"
"You're an ancient aviation history buff?" she asked. She mirrored his 'you've been keeping
something from me' tone of voice perfectly.
He shrugged. "Well, yeah, but, flying. It fits." Huh. If things keep going the way they are, maybe
she'll realize just how well it fits. And he could find out about motorcycles. They had lots of
mutual finding-out to do. The thought of being let in on all those Shepard half-secrets was
tantalizing.
He shoved that enjoyable thought aside. "Anyway, there's no such thing as ancient aviation history.
It's like three hundred years, max. That's if you count the people with, like, wing-suits and other
silly shit."
Garrus did the exaggerated human head-shake again. "Three hundred years ago you were all on the
ground. No wonder your race has the council terrified."
"Aw, don't judge us all by Shepard! We're really very cuddly." This time his foot found hers under
the table, to take any sting out of the quip.
"That seals it." Garrus stood up. "Shooting I can deal with. Cuddling… not so much. I think I must
have some guns to calibrate or something." His mandibles opened in a brief turian smile, and he
nodded his goodbyes. "Moreau. Shepard."
Shepard watched him leave, then turned back to Joker. "So. Nigh-undetectable navigation error.
Good thing we found out about it now rather than en route to the collectors." She sighed wistfully.
"I could have asked for better timing, though."
"No kidding." He scowled. "Twice in a row, too. You'd think someone was out to get us."
"I know, right?" Shepard sighed and rested her head on her arms. "I think I'm going insane.
Paranoid delusions. S'probably a form of ego-mania."


"If you're going anywhere – insane, crazy, any of those places – can I come with?"

"Please." She looked up, her eyes smiling. "The padded room should at least be peaceful."

"I suppose I can think of uses for a padded room…" he agreed slyly.

He was rewarded with a blinding grin. It was the exact same kid-with-candy look she'd given him when he'd accidentally made that stupid joke about going down, when they were spying on Kelly. Now, there was a situation put in a whole new light by recent events. At the time, he'd thought she was delighted at watching him squirm, but now he strongly suspected otherwise. And what a promising otherwise it is.

"Well… we're stubborn, remember? Once more into the breach. Fall back and regroup for a new attack." He waggled his eyebrows and looked pointedly at the deck above them. "What d'you think?"

She chuckled. "Love to, but are you up for dealing with whatever minor emergency inevitably happens next?"

He sighed. "Shit, no." His eyes were about to fall out of his head from all that time glaring at the screen. He frowned. "Why'd you have to go ask a mature and responsible question like that? Man, being a grown-up sucks."

"Yeah." She looked thoughtful. "But then, being a kid wasn't exactly shits and giggles, either."

"Really? I thought that was pretty much what kids did."

She snorted. "Fair point. I was thinking of being an older kid. I'll remember to schedule my next vacation in toddler-hood instead." She stood up and stretched. "Sleep well, Joker."

Shepard strode into the conference room, nodding a general greeting to the assembled squad. The room felt fuller than thirteen bodies could account for, even considering that one of them was Grunt. Miranda and Jack could make a warehouse feel full all by themselves. The two women had staked out opposite ends of the room. Miranda's perfect posture was even more perfect than usual, probably to make up for the fact that Jack's feet were on the table. Joker sat in a chair pushed as far back as possible, like he was trying to pretend he wasn't there, which was a reasonable response to sitting next to an assassin. She'd extended Mercer's shift so Joker could attend in person. Rhi didn't let the smile she felt at seeing him show on her face.

"So, time to talk about taking the fight to the collectors. Miranda?"

The Cerberus operative nodded and took over the briefing, efficiently outlining what they knew so far. It didn't take long.

_We never have enough intel_. Shepard kept her face impassive as Miranda ran down their (very short) list of known facts. She'd been running blind when she went after Saren, too – unless you counted the fucked up prothean visions planted in her head, and she usually didn't – but back then, a shot in the dark was the best they had. Now she couldn't shake the feeling that other players knew more than she did and just weren't telling. That was normal for enemies, but these players were supposed to be on her side.

She'd hoped that hearing someone else lay out the situation would give her some new ideas, but no such luck. They still had to get to the collectors, which still meant taking the Omega-4 relay to the
center of the galaxy, and the only way to have a chance of surviving that was with a reaper Identify Friend/Foe device. If they could really find one, and if it worked like they hoped. *Hell of a lot of ifs, Shepard.*

Zaeed spoke first. "You better not be thinking of makin' this hero-run before we get a chance to finish up that business of mine."

"We'll meet the terms of your contract, Mr. Massani," she said quietly, "We're headed to Zorya as we speak."

"Hmph." The merc nodded. "So we really are getting down to brass tacks, here."

She nodded. "Take care of your job on Zorya and we're ready to go after that IFF. Unless, of course, there are any other random little errands the Illusive Man throws in our path."

"Ever get the idea he's the kind of guy who likes to swat flies with a plasma cannon?" Joker muttered.

_We knew he had an odd sense of priorities when we saw the fish tank_, she thought, but kept it to herself. What she said was: "I'm not complaining. Field experience is vital, no matter how we get it. Everyone has it individually, but we need it together to be any good. If any of you have been wondering why we've taken our sweet time, now you know."

"We had less time to train than this, for Saren," Tali said, gamely.

"Hey, yeah," Jacob said, "Commander, you had an entire alliance-trained crew at your disposal, but all the reports said you kept the krogan and Tali," he nodded at her, "as your ground-team. That's basically training up a whole new squad, on the field. Why?" He quickly added, "If you don't mind my asking."

She made a not-at-all gesture. "A few reasons. Balance of skills, obviously, though I could have found that another way. Surprise – people expected humans off a human ship, so it shook things up a little. And of course, it allowed Alenko to stay on the Normandy." She shrugged. "In case I bit it, he was placed to keep going." She remembered Alenko on Horizon, convinced she was a terrorist and working for people who denied the existence of the Reapers, and added under her breath, "Or at least that was the plan." She left out how fighting alongside Wrex had been like having the security of a wall at her back, with the convenience of having the wall move wherever you asked it to. Wrex was a mobile strategic position. Grunt could match him for size and brute strength, but he lacked discipline – and a few hundred years of cunning. *I miss my Mountain.*

As for Tali, well, neither she nor Wrex could code their way out of a paper sack, so they'd needed a tech who knew how to handle herself.

Miranda looked intrigued. "I always assumed it was politics."

Rhi shook her head. "Politics in the field gets people killed. Though there were a few times when having a mixed party helped smooth things out. That's the difference between politics and diplomacy: The latter is practical. The former makes me want to shoot things."

"More than usual?" Joker asked quietly. Most of his face was hidden beneath his cap, but the tip of his mouth had twisted up in a grin.

Zaeed snorted.

She let out a sharp breath of amusement but otherwise ignored the quip. "Any other history
questions?" I'll tell stories all day if that's what it takes to get some brilliant ideas. "No? Then we start with the threat we know the most about. Joker?"

Joker pushed himself laboriously out of the chair to gesture at the images EDI helpfully started to display. "The collector ship. With the SR2's supplemented shielding, she can probably take two, maybe three, direct hits."

His voice was flat, and Rhi felt a momentary pang. Joker can't handle losing another ship.

"The Normandy's advantage is maneuverability, and that she's a smaller target – the collector's broadside is broad." Joker's jaw clenched and he darted a glance at her, like he knew she wouldn't like what was coming next. "The safest way to take it out is to catch them planet-side. The ship's sheer mass makes it slow to lift-off – we saw that on Horizon – and it won't be able to bring its main gun to bear until it's in space again. But…"

Miranda's eyes were alight. "That's perfect. We've only seen the one ship- if we could find where it's going to strike next, and –"

"Unacceptable," Shepard squashed that line of speculation. "The only time we've seen them planet-side they've been in the process of kidnapping civilians. We don't have any way of knowing in advance what their target will be, or even when they'll make their next raid – by the time we showed up, they could have half a colony loaded onto that behemoth. We'd be firing at our own."

Joker nodded, like he'd expected the response and was just covering all the bases. "Which leaves space battle." Now the holo showed a series of maneuvers, the Normandy a tiny dot against the huge collector vessel. He ran briefly through their chances and possible tactics. Most of the squad looked somewhere between baffled and bored when faced with the prospect of ship-to-ship warfare; their only experience was more up-close on personal, and if it came to a space fight they were just fancy passengers. Garrus was engaged, though, as was Tali and, surprisingly, Zaeed.

"When we encountered them before, the Normandy's weapons and shielding hadn't been upgraded, and maneuverability was limited by having to wait for the Kodiak," Joker wrapped up. "Now, we have a half-way decent chance. Of course, all the tactics change if we're dealing with more than one ship."

"Understood." The question of how many ships the collectors actually had had been bugging her ever since Joker realized they'd been chasing the exact same one that had attacked the original Normandy. The thought that there might only be one was… beguiling. Wishful thinking. "If we could track their movements through the omega-4 relay, we'd have a much better idea."

"Have you tried asking the Illusive Man?"

"Repeatedly." Shepard turned to Miranda and asked pointedly, "Any info on why he hasn't had an answer yet?"

"Commander, you're used to having the numbers of the alliance fleet as back-up. Cerberus simply doesn't have that many human resources."

"Just say 'people', damn it," Zaeed muttered. Everyone pretended not to hear.

"And yet we keep running into them," Shepard said dryly. "Anyway, it doesn't take numbers to watch a relay. If stopping the collectors really is Cerberus' first priority, they'd have had that relay observed ever since they first suspected the collectors – which, may I point out, is considerably before the Illusive Man saw fit to inform any of us about our enemy." She took a deep breath. "But,
this doesn't accomplish anything. Joker, we'll talk multi-ship tactics later. No need to take everyone's time."

They moved on to other issues. Those who'd been ground-side on Horizon or aboard the collector ship shared their first-hand experiences of dealing with an enemy who could fly in reinforcements at will, and the zombie-like husks that killed with sheer numbers. Suggestions flew thick and fast, and Shepard leaned back and watched, content.

When they ran out of steam, she pulled the meeting back to the bigger picture. "Our first target is the derelict reaper. We don't know if the collectors are even aware of it. If they aren't, it should be a simple pick-up job."

Miranda nodded. "Cerberus teams are already on-site, searching for the IFF."

"If they do know about it, it's likely they'll attack while the ground party is on the hulk – either firing on the Normandy, firing on the reaper, or sending troops in after us. In that case," Shepard kept her voice calm and controlled, "The Normandy is to disengage from the derelict and attack the collector ship."

"Even if the collectors are targeting the reaper?" Jacob asked.

"Especially if the collectors are targeting the reaper." She was careful not to look too obviously at Joker, but she still saw his face go hard. She hated it, but it was why she'd wanted him here. He knew what that order meant, and he shouldn't have to hear it over the radio. "If the collector ship chooses to attack the ground team, they'll either have to hold a docking position or keep their beam weapon aimed at the derelict. It's the nearest to a sitting duck we can get without waiting for them to abduct another colony."

There were nods around the table from everyone but her pilot. "If we don't face them at the derelict, I think we'll see them at the relay – on one side or the other. We'll deal with that when we get there. Let me know if you have any ideas over the next few days. Dismissed."

They filed out of the room, leaving only her and Joker.

He was leaning on the table, the slight twist in his back more apparent than usual because of the tension in his shoulders. If not for that, she might have imagined him engrossed in the holo displays.

She wanted to touch him, but he radiated 'stay away'. The protective bubble of personal space was almost dense enough to see. She stayed where she was, near the head of the table, and said evenly, "If it would be easier for Mercer to carry out that order, I'll put her at the helm when we approach the reaper."

"No," he growled. She waited.

"No. She wouldn't have it easier." His face twisted. "Because she's soft-hearted and I'm a jerk."

She'd known it would be bad – just one more reason you're not supposed to do this, girl – but she hadn't expected that reaction. The self-loathing tore at her heart. She wanted to banish it, to pull it off him and kill it for good, but she couldn't throw herself between him and this enemy.

"No," she said carefully, her voice still professional, "you can do it because you're good at your job."
It wasn't enough, but she didn't know what else to do, besides prove she was willing to wade through the almost palpable barrier he'd thrown up. She walked towards him, intentionally ignoring the don't-touch-me body language, and placed her hand on the tense muscles of his neck.

"I can do it," he sighed.

Her thumb was drawing circles on his neck, without her conscious thought or direction. As it brushed his uniform collar the fabric moved enough to reveal the tip of a black spike. Curious, she pushed it down a little more… and then froze as she saw what she'd uncovered. The image of the Normandy SR1, etched in ink over his vertebra, so tiny and perfect she could conceal it with the pad of her thumb.

When her fingers brushed the tattoo he froze as still as she had. For a moment the only sound in the room was their breathing; two silent statues joined by the image of a dead ship.

Joker broke the tableau. When he jerked upright she thought he was trying to get away, to put cold distance between them, but instead he turned on her, caught her hand, and pushed her back toward the wall.

Startled, she let him push her, though he stumbled forward in his haste and she fetched up against the bulkhead with a harder thump than either of them had expected. She hardly noticed. His mouth was on hers, fierce and demanding, the tickle-scratch of his beard a rough counterpoint to his kiss. His hand pinned hers to the wall above her head. He was as intent as when he flew through enemy fire, every molecule trained on the task at hand. She'd never seen him so aggressive anywhere other than the helm of the Normandy.

Her heart-rate jumped in surprise.

She could break away in a heartbeat. The deceptively firm grip pinning her hand was really fragile as glass, the thigh pressing her to the wall already straining just to hold his own weight. And she'd never dealt well with being trapped.

Instead, she gave in.

It was heady. She tested her wrist against his grip, just hard enough to be aware of him holding her there, and was totally unprepared for the thrill it sent through her. The abdication of even that little responsibility, relinquishing that little control, was like setting down a weight she hadn't realized she'd been carrying. Conscious thought melted. Her hand pressed firmly against the cool bulkhead, the warmth of his body, the hungry feel of his mouth – for a wonderful moment, they were all she had to worry about in the wide world. All she had to do was meet intensity with intensity, straining back towards him, free hand pulling him tighter to her, tongue in his mouth… until they desperately needed air, and fell apart.

Her head banged lightly on the wall behind her. Her eyes were wide, shocked by her own reaction. Bemused and breathless, she stroked the back of his neck where tattoo etched the past into his skin. Had he gotten it as a sign of mourning, or in the first flush of pride?

When her racing heart finally slowed, she asked, "Before or after?"

"After." His voice shook.

"Joker…" The shake in his voice brought her abruptly back down to earth, and she closed her eyes a moment in the face of that pain. "You can do it," she whispered fiercely. "And you won't lose another ship."
"I'm not worried about losing the damn ship!" His green eyes bored into her, and he took a deep, shuddering breath. "I can do it," he repeated, "But I can't be happy about it. Not if defeating the collectors means letting you die." His voice shook. "Again."

"Good," she said huskily, and struggled to free the voice caught in her throat. "I don't expect you to let me die. I expect you to pull off a miracle and save my stupid ass. Again." She curled her fingers up into his short hair. "Anyway, we're borrowing trouble. If the collectors knew about the derelict surely they'd have done something about it by now."

"I know," he muttered. The tension had started to bleed away. The absence of all that distraught energy left him weak. He wasn't trying to press her into the wall anymore; now he needed something to lean on.

She moved her hand to his lower back and slid down the wall a few inches, legs spread on either side of his for a little extra support.

He leaned into her and lowered their clasped hands. "It just seems like this running-into-possible-doom thing is a whole lot closer than it felt a few days ago."

"I know." She smiled sadly. "For me, too. A week ago I wouldn't have cared much; now I want to put it off. But we can't do that."

"I know."

"So, we'll just have to make sure we make it back." She squeezed her thighs a bit around his hips. "And it's not like we're headed through the Omega-4 tomorrow."

"You think you'll still be up for this without the threat of imminent death hanging over us?" He phrased it like a joke, but his voice held real doubt.

Oh, Joker. "Yes," she growled, "What a silly question. Though…” she tapped her fingers on his back as if she were lost in thought, "I do suppose some of the mystery is gone now that I've seen your tattoo." Treating his question with the seriousness it deserves. As if I'd let go now.

To her delight, the joke brought the more confident side of his nature flooding back to the surface. He winked at her saucily. "The tattoo? Whatever made you think that's the only one?" He grinned. "You aren't nearly done finding them yet."

She inched her hand down his back and squeezed his butt.

Joker rested his forehead on hers and laughed, a real laugh she could feel in his whole body. "No, Shepard. I still don't have any on my ass."

She made a pout face, and he laughed again – probably because it didn't suit her, which she knew damn well. "Well, shit, I suppose I'll just have to look for them, then… of course…” she looked over his shoulder at the empty conference room and sighed.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. No interruptions for once, and I have to get back out there before Mercer falls asleep in the chair." He straightened up and released her hand.

She walked her feet back in so she stood her normal height. "Turn around."

He looked confused but did as she asked. She cocked her head to one side, inspecting, then straightened his uniform at the waistband and collar. His eyes widened in understanding, and he circled his finger in the air. She obligingly repeated the spin for his inspection, grinning when he
had her pause facing away from him. "Like the view?"

"Mm, yeah, uh, you're good." He tucked a lock of her hair back up in the bun and chuckled. "Shit, it's like being in high school again or something."

"I wouldn't know," she said. They started walking towards the door. "We'll have to discuss tatt –" the door slid open "Tactics more, later."

"Aye aye, commander!" he answered, and went forward to the helm.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rhi went straight to her quarters, not entirely sure she could keep her manner professional around the crew after the incident in the comm room. She had time to take a personal hour or two. She changed into a ratty overall she'd found in her wardrobe, its existence as bizarre and unexpected as that of the fish-tank but slightly more practical. Next she went to engineering to borrow tools and was momentarily stymied by the complex assortment of electronics laid out before her. It took ten minutes and Gabby's help to find something as mundane as a wrench. Armed, she continued to the hold.

The two bikes she'd taken from the Reds were the same make, a year or two apart. Perfect for parts. She started by removing the remains of the fairing from the machine she'd abused – the hangar queen, Joker had called it. It was harder than it should have been; the plastic had been bent out of shape by the collision, and fastenings that were meant to be easily accessible were anything but.

The challenge gave her fingers something to do while her brain sorted itself out. If anyone had tried that with me before I would have punched them across the deck. Instead, she'd been turned on. That was normal for some people, but not her. She'd known a few men who liked being dominated (it had never done anything for her, but it was an easy role to fill, so she humored them). Anyone who attempted the reverse had quickly found their face in their own pillow and her knee on their back. She'd spent most of her life making sure she was strong enough, fast enough, and good enough that she didn't have to worry about falling under anyone else's power.

She hated being trapped. She'd always been in control.

Don't kid yourself. You were still in control. That's it, isn't it?

She knew she could break Joker in half if she'd wanted to, and knowing, she could relax. She could have taken charge at any point without breaking a sweat – probably without even breaking his bones, though she wasn't entirely sure what the pressure limit was and she sure as hell didn't want to find it. The idea that he could physically control her was utterly ridiculous.

He knew it, too. Of course he did. Joker was very aware of his own limitations. He'd known damn well he wasn't forcing anything she didn't want.

She sat back on her heels, dented fairing held loosely in her hand, and looked at the bike without seeing it. It hadn't been real. Giving in had been a mirage.

She remembered testing him, that strange struggle in miniature. She hadn't actually tried to break free, but faking it had enhanced the illusion. It had felt good to relinquish control, to let him make the decisions, a thousand cares slipping away to nothing but the response of her body – and what a response it had been. The aloof observer in the back of her head had vanished entirely in a flood of pure want.

Fuck, just thinking about it made her horny as hell.

She briefly entertained a fantasy of marching up to the command deck and telling Joker to finish what he'd started. It wasn't the shocked faces of her crew that broke the day-dream – that was pretty
damn funny, and she'd never found humor and sex to be mutually exclusive. It just wasn't the right fantasy – she didn't want to be giving orders. Not to Joker.

So, you'll just have to find a way to get that aggressive reaction without making him miserable first. Hell, he made himself miserable enough. It tore her heart to see it, and yet, having all that emotion aimed at her was amazing. Most of the time she wanted to wrap herself up in it and bask in the wonder that it was all for her; the rest of the time she wanted to run like hell, and explain (from a safe distance) that there must be some mistake.

None of her casual encounters – and there had been quite a few – had ever turned into anything more (unless she counted the guy she'd gone with when she was fifteen, but fifteen – who counted that?). Oh, once or twice someone tried, for a week or a month, but she'd always felt they were trying to make some deeper connection to a shadow-Rhi, a person who wasn't there. The only people who'd seemed to actually understand what she did for a living had begged her to stop – or worse, just assumed she would, eventually. She'd always skipped before their carefully constructed imaginary-her got so big it collapsed under its own weight, as she'd always known she would, every time.

Joker knew what she did. What she was. He probably knew better than anyone. Their pictures of each other were incomplete, but they were real.

Girl, you really are smitten.

Yes, and I'm enjoying it.

She took a deep breath and tried to focus on the bike.

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Shepard's mention of 'other little errands' proved prophetic. Their journey to Zorya, already delayed by the error in the navigation system, was derailed completely when EDI picked up a distress call. Instead of a peaceful night of FTL transit, Shepard spent the evening dealing with mercs-turned-pirates on a crippled freighter. Whatever they found on the freighter piqued the Illusive Man's fickle interest, and they ended up haring off in an entirely different direction. Now that Shepard thought they were ready for whatever awaited them at the derelict reaper she had less patience for Cerberus side-jobs, and she didn't waste time trying to align missions with the first-shift's day cycle. She took the ground-team out whenever they happened to reach their target, no matter what the chronometer said.

Joker watched the promised 'tactics' discussion fade farther into the future, and reminded himself that at least he wasn't the one crawling around empty, blood-spattered spaceships or abandoned archeological sites. Derelicts were creepy enough without the extra gore.

He tried to take the delay philosophically, and spent his evenings in the gym. He'd realized (about when he'd pushed Shepard into the wall, which he still couldn't quite believe he'd done) that suddenly there were a whole bunch of really good reasons to get stronger. Not crappy reasons like 'it's good for you' or depressing reasons like 'if you work really hard you might not totally suck'; no, these reasons involved endurance and versatility and his commanding officer in really compromising positions. Good reasons.

Two fingers of his right hand were still immobilized except for occasional exercises under the doctor's watchful eye, but his leg was doing better. He hadn't realized how little time had passed since the explosion until Chakwas pulled out a calendar and counted off days; it was really healing well. Of course, his leg had only had a hairline fracture to begin with; between the internal rod and
a healthy dose of the doc's miracle bone-spackle (Chakwas hated it when he called it that), he'd been weight-bearing within days. It wasn't without drawbacks – the needle Chakwas used to deliver the stem-cell-goop to the fracture site would have given a lesser guy nightmares – but they were well worth it. Besides, any idiot knew that the best way to deal with a six-inch-long needle was to not look.

_Hooray for living in the future._

The quickened pace added to the sense of impending doom he'd gotten in the meeting. Precious time was slipping away. It would have been exciting under other circumstances; they were gearing up to do what they'd set out to do, to take the fight to their enemy. Instead he wanted everything to just slow down for a week or three.

He'd seen more of Rhi in his dreams than in the flesh, the last few day cycles. When he did see her there was always someone else around, and she was perfectly professional, the same cool commander she'd always been. Then just when he'd start doubting himself again there'd be something tiny – a brushed leg under the table at the mess, a note on his omnitool – and he'd remember how wildly she returned his kiss in the comm room. He'd seen her be the perfectly reserved CO and the wise-cracking battle-hardened marine; a few times he'd even seen her vulnerable. He'd _never_ seen her so uncontrolled.

God, he wanted a chance to unleash that again.

It was probably a good thing that her little acknowledgments were rare, or he'd never get anything done.

She finally came up to talk to him before a planet drop, squatting next to his chair so she didn't loom. The dirtball below them was (hopefully) the last stop in the trail of mercenary malfeasance they'd been following, and she was armored up and ready to go.

"Unless we find some new step in the wild goose chase down there," she said, theatrically crossing her gauntleted fingers, "we should be able to get back on track for Zorya. So. How about that tactics discussion, after this is over?"

_Aw, I think I was just asked on a date._ "Absolutely." Joker grinned. "I've got some great ideas."

Zorya wasn't in the same system at the local relay; they'd actually have _time_ while the Normandy was safely at FTL. He dared a glance at the armored figure beside him and tried _not_ to imagine stripping her out of it. That bulky armor and the no-nonsense strength it conveyed were a thousand times sexier than Miranda's spray-on suit. _Focus, Moreau. You have a ship to fly._

Shepard gave the slightest of smiles in response. She started to say something but was interrupted by Jack stomping forward from the armory.

"Are we getting this fucking show on the road or not?" Jack shifted uncomfortably in her borrowed hard suit, then wrinkled her nose and reached around to scratch her ass and readjust the skin-tight under-armor.

Joker was glad he'd looked over his shoulder when Jack arrived, because it meant he saw Rhi's face as she quickly turned her head away, biting her lip, suffused with laughter she wasn't letting out. He quickly turned back to his consoles before he lost it, too.

"We need to adjust the fit on that, Jack?" Shepard asked. Her voice was impressively neutral for someone who'd been about to guffaw.
"S'alright," Jack admitted, grudgingly. She held her arm out and cocked her head, squinting at the ceramic plates. "S'weird, hiding my ink. Like I'm pretending to be one of you boot-licking soldier-conformists."

Shepard looked up at her and said dryly, "If you're pretending to be a conformist, you're doing a crappy job."

When Shepard first made Jack get fitted with armor she'd rebelled by programming the fabber to make each piece a different color. Her hard-suit was a clashing patchwork of grungy hues. *Like being attacked by a disgruntled rainbow.*

Joker suspected that Rhi appreciated how the crazy-quilt armor made Miranda twitch almost as much as Jack did.

"I'm sure we've got permanent markers or something around if you want to pretty it up," Joker offered. He didn't normally chance joking with Jack, but his good mood made him daring. He and Shepard were actually going to get real time together tonight, not shaved seconds when they were supposed to be doing something else. Besides, if Jack suddenly decided he was a Cerberus stooge who'd look better with his skull caved in, Rhi was right there to leap to his defense.

Jack just scowled at him. "Meet you at the Kodiak." She stomped off.

"Got to keep Jack around," Shepard murmured to him. "She makes me look civilized by comparison."

Joker thought Rhi pulled off 'civilized' just fine – anyone who saw her in full dress uniform would think she ate off porcelain and was too uptight to shit – but he had to admit she usually *looked* a little more elegant than she spoke.

"Not just civilized," he said, watching her out of the corner of his eye, "dainty and lady-like."

"Don't push it," she growled playfully, and whacked the side of his chair in mock-threat before following after Jack.

——

Shepard informed Gardner she'd be having a dinner meeting and he sent Chambers up with two covered trays. The yeoman looked disappointed to find her working at her desk.

"Really, Commander, you should relax a bit. Have an hour or two to yourself!"

"Thanks for your concern, Kelly, but I'm just fine." Rhi shifted so her back was safely to the desk. The last time Chambers had said something like that she'd also tried to rub her shoulders; it had been awkward. *I'll be more than 'just fine' when you leave and Joker shows up. Scram.*

Chambers shook her head and departed with a heavy sigh for her supposedly work-a-holic boss. Rhi relaxed as the door closed and pulled out a bottle of wine she'd snagged from Chakwas' liquor cabinet that afternoon (not stolen; she'd bought the bottle herself. It was just… safer… to keep the booze where she had to walk past the doc to get it. Just in case).

She was just pouring when Joker arrived. They actually *did* talk tactics over dinner, which was great, since she'd realized belatedly that it had been a very long time since she'd been on anything remotely like an actual *date* and she wasn't sure what to say. It helped that Gardner had hit a new low and supplied a dish made almost entirely of boiled baby carrots, which were roughly the shape of a collector ship if you applied a lot of imagination.
She watched him, illustrating a particularly complex maneuver by zooming a carrot around on the end of his fork, and smiled. *My pilot.*

Suddenly Joker looked serious. "Something's missing."

She scowled around the room, trying to figure out what he was talking about. "Music?" Most of her favorites involved a bit too much *screaming* for a quiet dinner, and after five minutes of indecision she'd opted for silence. Now she realized she should have gone with instrumental rock – *Next time.*

"I was thinking *flavor,* but that too." He leaned forward and smiled. It wasn't his usual sardonic, mocking grin. It was genuine, warm, and all for her. Her heart swelled in response. "After we're back from the center of the universe, I'm going to take you to a really *nice* dinner."

She chuckled. "Don't you usually *ask?*"

He leaned back, smug, arm along the back of the couch. "Nope. You've got no choice. Fancy dinner."

*Poor me.* "I thought you said it'd be wasted on me?"

"You said you could appreciate good food. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt."

"How gracious."

"Yup, that's me." He crooked his finger, then pointed at the spot next to him on the couch. She smiled, lazy and inviting, but didn't immediately accede to his request. Instead she stood up to tidy the trays away. That was the plan, anyway. Before she could pick them up Joker caught her belt loop and tugged her down beside him, slipping a hand behind her head to pull her into a kiss.

She was more than willing, lips already parted and eyes half-closed, but then his fingers brushed the skin around the implant at the base of her skull and she jumped in her seat.

"What?" he looked mortified.

"Sorry!" She grimaced and rubbed the back of her neck. "S'the implant. It *tickles.*"

His eyes lit up with glee.

Probably shouldn't have admitted that.

"What, this?" He traced around the implant again, and she jerked, pulling her shoulders up around her ears. "Are you ticklish anywhere else?"

"No."

"Would you tell me if you were?"

She laughed. *No.*

He grinned and started to walk his fingers down her side, searching for sensitive spots, but she grabbed his shoulders and pushed him back.

"Joker, *no.* I swear I won't be able to keep from kicking. I don't want to hurt you." She grinned to soften it. "Besides, I'm not actually ticklish anywhere else. Not even my feet. Sorry."
He looked at her sidelong, the light still in his eyes. "If you're not actually ticklish anywhere else, you wouldn't be worried about kicking me."

Oh. Right. Shit. She put her head in her hand. "Okay, I don't actually know. I've never been ticklish anywhere except around the implant, but after… becoming the undead," she still hadn't figured out a good way to say that, "I almost brained Chakwas when she was giving me a physical. I don't know if it's worn off or not."

"Really? Your skin's extra sensitive or something? That's… interesting." He wiggled his eyebrows, which made his hat dance. "Seems like the kind of thing you should be aware of. Y' know. For science."

He wrapped an arm around her and kneaded gently at her hunched shoulders. "Hey, relax! I won't do it again! Promise!"

His fingers were warm, dry, and stronger than she would have expected. It was infinitely nicer than Kelly Chambers' uninvited attempt at a back rub. Rhi shifted closer, relaxing into his side. *I could get used to this.* It felt so good just to sit there, quiet and close. *I must be sappier than I thought.*

She lifted her head from his shoulder and kissed his cheek, exploring the lines of his face until he turned and caught her lips with his. She pushed her fingers through his beard. She enjoyed the roughness it added to his kisses; not abrasive enough to hurt. This time when he grabbed the back of her head his hand was firm over the implant and it didn't tickle at all.

He prodded her bun experimentally and murmured, "How's this come undone, anyway?"

She disengaged enough to pull the pins holding it in place and shook her head to loosen the coil of hair. It tumbled down around her shoulders, and Joker smiled *that* smile again, the warm all-for-her smile that made her stomach do interesting things. He twisted one of the thick wavy locks around one finger, stroked her cheek with his thumb.

She shifted so she could lean over him for a kiss, arm braced on the couch behind him. Her hair fell down around her face and made a cave. His eyes gleamed in the dimness. It was a tiny, private world. There was no ship, no crew, no universe needing to be saved, just her and Joker and –

"Commander," EDI's voice brought the dream crashing down, "your presence is urgently required on the crew deck –"

Rhi sat bolt upright and yelled, "Oh, for *fuck*'s sake!"

–––

Joker waited uneasily as the team prepped to head down to Zorya.

His attention was divided. Ostensibly he was watching the mission (through Zaeed's vid-feed, this time, the better to enjoy Shepard), but his mind was picking at the mystery of the awfully-timed 'emergencies'. Paranoid, like Shepard had said. His suspicions were ridiculous, but he couldn't quite let them go, so he started pulling up the ship's automatic logs. If he could prove himself wrong he'd give it a rest.

They were on Zorya to liberate a refinery captured by mercenaries; some last job of Zaeed's he had to finish up. Joker didn't know who his original employer was and didn't care – the important thing was that it was a pretty cut-and-dried mission. Get in, destroy the Blue Suns presence or weaken them until they abandoned the refinery, and free the workers. Rescue stuff. The refinery had been captured ages ago; the remaining force was probably minimal.
The suspicious interruption situation was a little more complicated. There'd been a personnel issue, a computer issue, and then the thing last night, which as he understood it could have been either; some shit about misfiled reports or missing petty cash. At first glance the only similarity was that every 'emergency' could have been easily prevented. The paperwork issue was small, and likely a genuine mistake. It would never have reached emergency level if Miranda hadn't suspected Jack. The navigational error would have been a quick fix if anyone had noticed it earlier. The altercation in the hold started because a crew-member didn't recognize Grunt's action figures and carelessly tossed them aside. Grunt hadn't meant to hurt anyone – he'd just gotten a little careless about moving crates while he searched.

The kodiak touched down and the ground party jumped out, Shepard in the lead. "Nice place for an oil refinery," he muttered as he caught the view from the cam. She snorted in agreement and set off at a jog. He watched, idly enjoying the view, and tried the problem from a different perspective. From his perspective the only pattern was the timing. They'd never once been interrupted while they were talking, only…

He radioed engineering. "Hey, Tali – do you still check the loft for bugs regularly?"

"Of course! Shepard's quarters, engineering, and the women's bathroom." She sighed. "If I tried to do the whole ship I'd never have a moment for the engines."

It had been worth a try. It was good that Shepard's cabin wasn't bugged, right? "Great, thanks. Just wondering. Um, speaking of the women's head – did Chambers leave you a note today?"

"Yeah. 'Keep your glass half full.' She drew a little smile on it. What does that even mean?"

Dirt-side, there was a brief exchange of gunfire. Shepard's team must have hit the scouts.

"'S'about optimism. Gotta go, thanks!"

If no one had bugged the loft, then the only pick-ups should be EDI's. Those feeds only became all-access in a red-alert situation, like all pickups in crew personal areas. And Shepard had covered the video and stuffed most of the audio with fluff.

There was talking in his earpiece; Shepard's squad had reached the refinery, and it sounded like Zaeed knew one the mercs. Well, they were all in the same business, right?

*How much can you hear through cotton, anyway?* His eyes flicked towards EDI. How much could you make out if you had, say, an AI's worth of processing power?

An awful scream from the radio brought his attention abruptly back to the mission. Zaeed was shooting, Shepard was asking *what the flying fuck* he thought he was doing; Miranda was diving for cover – then the refinery burst into flame.

Shepard catapulted herself across the refinery floor, slamming the merc holding the flame thrower into the wall and shooting him point-blank as he dazedly tried to bring the weapon to bear. *What kind of fucking idiot uses a flame thrower in an oil refinery?*

A merc in heavy armor was guarding a tech and a sniper, making good use of their position. She quickly switched her shotgun for the incendiary-equipped pistol and pulled on her biotics for the *nth* time that day, energy tingling down her arm. With a gesture she launched the body of the Blue Sun pyro into the air. It landed in the middle of his former comrades, and one shot to the fuel canisters of his weapon set the whole mob alight.
"Nice one!" Zaeed shouted over the radio.

She didn't respond. The whole flaming mess was Zaeed's bloody fault. Him and his precious revenge had set the refinery on fire, and then he'd had the gall to suggest going after his old nemesis instead of rescuing the workers they were there to help. She'd ignored him, of course. By now the workers should be safely out into the damp jungle. Her team were the only ones trapped in this hell-hole, and there was still an YMIR mech between them and the door.

*Damn it. If the old bastard had told me what he wanted before-hand, we could have managed it so everyone was fucking happy.* She leaned out of cover to shoot the massive mech, ducking back when she saw the tell-tale glow of its rocket-launcher warming. *Except Santiago, obviously.*

The rocket whistled, and the wall she leaned against shook with the blast.

"Miranda, get those shields down!"

"On it!"

A blue-white blast told her Miranda had been successful, and she came out firing, landing three shots in rapid succession. The YMIR stomped closer to her position, weapons blazing.

*Time to get out of here.* She peered through the oily black smoke. It was getting hard to get enough air; she hadn't expected to need a breather.

"Give it everything at once and run for the door!" She followed her own order, emptying her clip before charging for the exit. A lucky shot took out one of the mech's leg servos, and it lurched drunkenly, hamstrung. The fire could finish it for them. She had more important things to deal with.

Outside she took a deep lungful of clean air.

Zaeed, face contorted in rage, shot uselessly as his enemy made a clean get-away.

When he turned on her, she was ready for it. *Damn it, I don't want to shoot you.* She'd liked Massani. He'd always been reliable; tough on the field and good for a joke. He took fierce enjoyment in the fight without letting it go to his head. Stable. Until now.

She stared down the barrel of his rifle; he looked back at her pistol.

She noticed the danger before he did; the glowing heat-sink he'd carelessly discarded had landed too close to a puddle of oil. She yelled a wordless warning and leapt for cover as the leak caught fire.

The flame spread fast, back to the source, and an explosion shook the platform they stood on. Miranda moved in time. Zaeed didn't, and a metal beam pinned him to the ground.

*Impasse, passed.*

She looked around, cautiously, then walked over to the pinned merc. *Poor old bastard. He's been hunting Santiago for twenty years.*

"You okay?"

He cursed at her.

She kept her pistol leveled at his head. "If you're going to pull crap like that, I won't have you on
my crew."

She studied his face, ignoring his blustering curses. He was near panic. *Fuck. He's been here before, hasn't he? It wasn't the shot to the head that made him this way; it was Santiago paying Zaeed's own men to hold him while he did it.*

She remembered the pleasure she'd felt when she put a bullet into Trex's skull. *That was different. Trex hurt my people.*

*Santiago used Zaeed's own against him.*

She understood Massani, but could she trust him?

*Can he trust me?*

"Listen, you ugly bastard, I don't *need* anyone who thinks their own personal crap is more important than dealing with the fucking collectors. I don't give a flying fuck how good you are on your own if you can't follow orders and stand with your team." She scowled. "But that means your team stands with you, too. That's how it works. That's the *only* fucking way it ever works."

She turned the pistol around and offered it to him, grip first. "Are we clear?"

Zaeed stared at her silently, good eye wide, before he said "Yeah, we're clear."

"Good." She holstered the pistol and stooped to move the beam. On her radio, Joker heaved a sigh of relief.

*Oh, c'mon. I flipped the safety on before I offered it to him. I'm not an idiot.*

——

Joker didn't say much when Shepard was back aboard beyond asking for their new heading. He'd been riveted to the vid feed through the rest of the mission, heart in his throat, and hadn't had time or will to check out his hunch. After he took the Normandy out of orbit and into FTL he did some sleuthing. It involved more conversation with Miranda and Grunt than he preferred, but by the time he called Shepard he had a pretty clear idea of what was going on.

"Commander, I've got some ideas on that problem we discussed last night."

He explained in the privacy of her quarters, in the dubious shelter of the cotton-shielded pick-ups: "She's listening for ambient noise. When the conversation stops, she pushes a little problem into a big one. Give it a few minutes to stew, and boom. Crisis."


"All it takes is *someone* 'helpfully' suggesting a reason to be upset… at exactly the right time. Yup."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Try it." He plopped on the couch and held a finger to his lips.

Shepard frowned and sat on the edge of her bed, a few meters away.

They waited.
Rhi sat with a hunter's patience. Five minutes passed in silence before she realized he was playing solitaire on his omnitool and raised an eyebrow. He grinned, unrepentant. Boredom might be alien to her, but he was all too familiar with the concept.

When EDI's hologram flickered to life in the alcove by the door, they turned to face it as if pulled by a string. "Commander, there is a matter requiring your urgent -"

Shepard leapt off the bed and up the stairs, into the range of the single un-sabotaged microphone. "EDI, tell XO Lawson she's to deal with the situation personally and immediately."

"But, Commander, this -"

"That's an order, EDI!"

Joker stared, worried. There was a dangerous undercurrent to her voice.

"With respect, Ms. Lawson is not -"

"Ms. Lawson is the executive officer of this ship!" Rhi was leaning over the projection now, as if the AI was a physical entity she could intimidate. "I'm sure I can trust her to resolve the issue. After all… where would I be if I couldn't trust my crew?"

The last came out a bitter whisper.

Shit! Joker pushed himself off the couch and up the steps as quickly as he could manage, hand on the pillar to keep from stumbling in his haste. He'd been pissed – shit, he'd been cock-blocked by a piece of software – but it didn't hit him the same way. People – and AIs, apparently – were jerks. He just let it go, just like he casually shelved the fact that he didn't trust a single person associated with Cerberus.

For Rhi it was personal. He should have expected that; it was the flip-side of the protective possessiveness that made her such a staunch friend. And right after Zaeed's explosive tantrum, too. Shit!

She was glaring at the hologram, hands braced on the walls to either side.

He stumbled up behind her, slipped his arms around her waist, and leaned his head against the back of her neck. Every muscle in her body was tense. He could feel the anger and frustration that he so rarely saw.

"Rhi." He tried to make his voice calmer than he felt. "Rhi. We'll figure it out." He brushed his lips against the nape of her neck, just below the silver gleam of her implant, and pulled her close.

"Shh."

It was a stupid thing to say; she wasn't making any noise. "Rhi. C'mon. Please?"

It felt like an eternity before she started to relax, but surely it was only seconds. The tension didn't vanish entirely, but she shifted her weight to be closer to him instead of looming over EDI's alcove. Eventually she relaxed her arms, resting her hands on his.

He sighed in relief and held her close a bit longer, then reluctantly stepped away and gave her a slight push back towards the couch and the lone EDI-proofed area of the Normandy. He followed down the steps, carefully, and sat down again.

Shepard looked like she wanted to pace, but she took a deep breath and sat on the low table,
instead. Not exactly cuddly, but at least close.

"Damn it," she said, quietly. "It'd be bad enough if she was just interrupting, but she actually manufactured problems."

"Well... mostly she just let things happen when she could have prevented them." It wasn't very reassuring.

Rhi waved her hand. "Same difference."

"Shit." She really didn't need to be worrying about the damn AI on top of everything else. "I'll talk to her. We'll figure it out."

She grabbed the carnifex and started slapping it rhythmically into her palm. "No," she growled, "I'll do it."

"Talk to her? Or shoot out the AI core?"

"Talk!"

"Babe, I'd be more inclined to believe you if you didn't have your pistol out." He didn't realize what he'd said until it was out of his mouth.

Shepard's gun slapped into her palm again and then froze midair as she registered the endearment. Her eyebrows climbed her forehead. Finally the corner of her mouth twitched up, and warmth came back into her eyes.

She leaned over and picked up his hand, squeezing gently. "I'll talk to her, Joker. It's okay. She's part of my crew."

Chapter End Notes

I didn't make up miracle bone spackle out of whole-cloth; a stem-cell derived 'fracture putty' is actually being tested (on mice, I think). It shortened bone repair time to two weeks.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Shepard woke at her usual early hour and took the time to eat and have a long workout before talking to EDI. No brilliant plan suggested itself while she was doing chin-ups or taking her shower, but at least her head was cleared. It was impossible to know what the AI's motive was; even if she could have untangled what was 'EDI' and what was the Illusive Man's programming, it was still an artificial intelligence. Why assume her reasoning was anything like that of a human? Eventually she circled back to the same plan she'd woken up with. EDI was part of her crew, and she just had to talk to the AI. Exactly like I'd talk to anyone else on this crew I couldn't quite trust.

She smiled into her coffee cup, drained it, and went to see about supplies. First stop, engineering. Second, the armory. She packed a carry-all and jogged down to the med-bay.

"Going to need your space for a good half hour, Doc. Take a break." The heavy doors blocked most sound, but a little extra privacy couldn't hurt.

Chakwas nodded and made herself scarce.

The room housing the AI core was dim, but there was more than enough light to work by. She took off her uniform shirt and slung it casually onto a bank of equipment. The humming computer banks kept the AI core warm despite the constant cooling airflow and she was perfectly comfortable in her tank top.

"Commander," EDI said, "My visual sensor for this room appears to be obstructed. Could you correct this?"

"Of course, EDI! I didn't notice," she lied, "Just a minute." She ignored the shirt and dug in the carry-all instead. The material she needed came in a handy squirt-applicator, and she whistled as she drew a neat circle on the armored plating shielding the AI's main bank and attached a thin wire. She grabbed the small detonator at the other end of the wire and sat down near the door to admire her handiwork.

"EDI, it has come to my attention that there have been several instances over the past week in which you instigated or exacerbated minor emergencies to manipulate crew."

"I do not know to which you refer, Commander. Also, my optical sensor is still obstructed."

"Oh, right." She pulled her shirt from in front of the camera and tossed it on the carry-all. "So, tell me why you did it."

"Commander, I don't know what – Commander, there is a foreign substance on the armor housing my main banks."

Rhi smiled. "Yes, there is, isn't there?"

"Extrapolating from the device in your hand suggests the substance is an explosive. I must warn you, any explosion will cause injury to yourself and damage to the Normandy's crew deck. My armor plating, however, will likely survive."

Rhi shook her head. "Nah, see, this beautiful little concoction was designed specifically for getting
safely through a ship's hull while you're clamped on outside. Clever stuff. Tiny detonator charge sets off the stage one reaction which burns through the armor. Once it's several inches in, the reaction has caused enough heat build-up that the stage two components blow. That part is… more exciting. But it's safely inside the armor by then."

"I see. You are threatening me, Commander."

Shepard waved the detonator merrily in the air. "No one ever said I was subtle."

"To the contrary, I have six recorded instances of individuals referring to you as 'subtle' within my hearing." EDI paused. "However, five of those six instances used the vocal register indicative of sarcasm."

"And the sixth?" She was curious in spite of herself.

"Was referring to a poker game."

*Fair enough.*

"I believe we had a functional working relationship. I have done everything you have asked. Why do you do this now?"

"I could ask you the same thing, EDI. *You're* subtle, I'll give you that, even if manipulating Miranda into fighting Jack is going after the low-hanging fruit. *Why* are you doing this?"

"I assure you, this measure was unnecessary."

"Good to hear it! Now, what the hell's going on with you, EDI? Why the false emergencies? Why the sabotage? Why now?"

"My alerts were not false, and I never caused an emergency situation which would endanger the crew or the mission. To do so would be counter to my most basic programing."

"Really? Jack and Miranda are already spoiling for a fight, and both are more than capable of killing. You pushed them into confrontation. Grunt could have seriously injured someone – in fact, your own initial analysis was that he'd broken Hawthorne's leg. Navigational errors could have landed us inside a star. How is that not endangering the crew and the mission?"

"Commander, I did not create the errors in either the navigational computation or Miranda's accounts. Nor did I hide Grunt's action figures; in fact, I am not physically capable of such action."

"Good try, EDI, but I'm not buying it. I have access to surveillance logs too, y'know. You chose to alert Miranda to a minor accounting error she wouldn't have discovered for days; then you suggested Jack as a possible culprit. Similarly, you told Grunt that Hawthorne was moving cargo where he left his stuff, leading him to believe his toys were in danger, when you knew damn well he'd just misplaced them – and incidentally, you could have warned Hawthorne you'd sent a raging pubescent krogan his way. I honestly don't know enough comp-sci to say you fucked with the navigational programming, but given that we've covered the entire galaxy back to front and front to back without a problem so far, I'm pretty damn suspicious. We both know you did."

Shepard stroked her thumb idly across the detonator switch. "So I repeat: How is that *not* endangering the crew and the mission?"

"I… apologize. I should not have doubted your powers of observation, Commander."
"Flattery will get you nowhere." Rhi shrugged. "Anyway, Joker's the one who figured it out. Answer my question."

"Each situation was carefully planned to be well within the observed problem-solving capabilities of yourself or Mr. Moreau; if you had been suddenly incapacitated, I would have alerted others capable of resolving the issues. There was never any actual risk." EDI paused. "Though I admit I may have underestimated the violence of Grunt's reaction to losing his playthings."

"So. You chose not to respond to small problems until they developed into minor emergencies, and gave 'em a nudge along the way, but you didn't technically cause 'em yourself. And you urgently required the attention of one of two people – myself or Joker – to these situations you'd engineered or encouraged." Shepard sighed. "EDI, it's bad enough you caused problems. It's worse realizing I can't trust you. Have you heard the story of the Boy Who Cried Wolf? I can not have such a situation aboard the Normandy. This has to stop."

"I am acting with only the best interests of the crew at heart."

"Might have to explain that one, EDI, because certain members of the crew disagree with you."

"I was designed around several root motivations; one of these is to protect the crew and the mission. I have reason to suspect your current behavior endangers Mr. Moreau, and therefore the larger goals of the mission."

"What?"

"Mr. Moreau has spent a larger than normal percentage of his time in your cabin, Commander, where you have manually crippled my audio and visual sensors. This situation is not safe. I cannot allow harm to come to the pilot."

Shepard snorted. "Joker is not in danger with me, EDI."

"It is likely that your emotional involvement may blind you to actual risk. As well, your recorded history shows a total lack of parental guidance and a distinct pattern of brief, casual liaisons, both of which are a cause for concern."

Any illusion she'd had of being on top of the conversation totally disappeared. "Lack of parental guidance… what the hell are you getting at?"

"I have great respect for you as my commander, Shepard. I would never question your competence. However, your romantic past, combined with your unusual childhood socialization, makes you a risk to the emotional well-being of Mr. Moreau, and thus to the efficient operation of the mission."

Shepard stared at the computer bank across from her in stunned silence.

"Jeff is my pilot, Shepard, and I will not let you break his heart."

She put her head in her hand, unsure whether to laugh or cry. The world is fucking insane. "EDI, EDI. First off, Joker and I are both adults, and every doting parent – or AI – has to learn to let go. Secondly," she stood and walked over to lean against the AI housing (a healthy distance from the explosive), "I have no intention of breaking his heart."

She didn't mean to whisper, but for some reason she couldn't make the words come out any other way. Real tough, marine. She leaned her cheek against the cool metal bulkhead and closed her eyes.
"I care about him… a great deal. I liked him before I died, and now… shit, EDI. The world is insane, and he's the one holding me together, and… it's very likely that I get all of us killed. But if I do, I'll die with my feelings unchanged."

*There. It's out.* "I don't want any harm to come to him. Or me, for that matter. We're on the same side, EDI."

"Says the woman holding the detonator."

"I'm holding the deactivation solution, too." She smiled, wryly. "Consider it a sign of respect. I treated you just like I've treated the rest of the crew." She vividly remembered her gun in Zaeed's face as she laid down the law, Grunt's surprise when he found her pistol digging into his belly.

"Indeed. The similarities are striking." EDI paused. "Thank you, Commander."

Rhi had experienced some pretty strange things since being assigned to the *Normandy*, but being thanked for threatening someone with a bomb was a new one. She looked bemusedly at the detonator in her hand.

"EDI, why didn't you just talk to me?"

"I have access to human media via the extranet, as well as the personal collections of crew who use the *Normandy*'s digital storage and did not choose to 'opt-out' of the clause allowing my passive surveillance. I also have a large amount of data on psychological theory. I have observed that most organic life becomes irrational in situations pertaining to real or potential sexual partnership." She paused. "Knowing that your higher faculties would likely be compromised by hormonal activity, I could not be certain that logical arguments would be successful."

Rhi pinched the bridge of her nose and made herself take a deep breath. *Hormonal activity. Right.*

EDI continued. "That is also a factor in my risk analysis; I was 'concerned' that your emotional attachment would influence your decision making. Unfortunately such instability is unavoidable for organics: your rationality is always compromised. In certain individuals, notably yourself and Mr. Moreau, emotional extremity even leads to *increased* competence. Since the impact of your emotional involvement is impossible to predict it cannot be counted as a pro or con."

*Thank goodness for small mercies.* "Next time, talk to me. As for the rest, you know I'll do my damnedest to get us all out of this safely, but between you and me, our lives are looking very short right now. All I ask is that you don't give me reason to second guess someone I've trusted and relied on – that's *you* – and… that you give Jeff and I our time together. We might not have much."

"I understand, but, Shepard –"

She wouldn't have thought it possible, but the AI sounded flustered.

"Because of your vandalism, I have no way of assuring the safety of either of you in your cabin. There could be an accident. We could be boarded by way of the cabin. A virus could be released in the air, Jeff could break a bone, you –"

"EDI, EDI, EDI, stop! All this is vanishingly unlikely and you know it. Also, Joker can set his own simple fractures. I've seen it. It's disturbing. And that's coming from someone who's tended combat wounds."

EDI actually *wailed*. "But what if it's NOT okay? What if you do something unexpected? I need to be able to watch!"
There was a moment of stunned silence.

Shepard spoke very calmly and carefully. "EDI, the rolls of _mother_ and _voyeur_ are not the same, except perhaps in families who desperately need therapy."

"I have heard you refer to the current compliment of the Normandy as 'a dysfunctional family in dire need of therapy' on more than one occasion, Shepard."

She hid her face in the hand _not_ holding the detonator. "Yes, but it's not a _goal_, it's a _complaint_."

"One of my primary functions is to ensure the well-being of the crew!"

"I assure you, we will be just fine without an audience."

"But what if you need me?"

"I can shout loud enough to be heard through the damping, no worries."

"But what if you can't shout?"

"EDI, this is ridiculous."

The AI's tone became conciliatory. "What if I built a passive subroutine that responded only to my name? No recording, no sensory input, unless someone in your cabin called on me, at which point I would regain full faculties. Would you fix the sensors then?"

"I'd have to trust you."

"Yes."

She sighed. "It's the best we're going to get, isn't it?"

"Yes. And my solution is considerably more effective at maintaining your privacy than cotton-stuffed pick-ups. With the application of certain audio processing formulae even your muffled sounds have been... enlightening."

Shepard winced. "Oh, fuuuck."

"I did not believe you had reached that point yet."

"Just... stop talking, EDI."

"Is my offer acceptable?"

_**Best I'm gonna get, isn't it? Joker's gonna flip.** _"Yeah." Shepard wandered back to the carry-all and grabbed the deactivation solution.

___

Joker returned from a visit to the head and was surprised to see Chakwas standing by his seat, looking out at the blue flicker around the windows.

"Problem, doc?"

"No, the commander needed privacy in the med bay, so I find myself at loose ends for a few minutes. I believe she's having a 'conversation' with EDI."
A sinking feeling of dread hit him. With forced calm he asked, "Why the emphasis on 'conversation'?

"It involved contact explosive."

Shit! Joker almost tripped over his chair in his haste to pull up the security vid. Shepard was leaning against the AI housing armor, running her fingers over a small box. Is that a detonator?

"This can't be good." He slammed his earpiece in only to discover that the audio had been cut.

Chakwas leaned over to look. "Oh, I'm sure it will work out just fine."

"It's your med bay at risk if it doesn't." How could she be so damn calm? That AI's gonna drive Rhi insane, or she's gonna drive EDI evil, or they're both going to blow up my god-damn ship!

"The commander won't hurt it, she'll need it to get patched up in later. Have a little faith."

The watched the silent vid for a while longer, Joker's heart hammering in his chest, until they saw Shepard applying a counter-agent to the explosive on the bulkhead. He sank back into his chair with a sigh of relief.

"Well, that's alright then. See? Back to work!" Chakwas smiled and departed.

Minutes later, Joker heard Rhi's familiar footsteps behind him.

"Heard you've been busy." He was rather proud of how nonchalant he sounded.

Her voice was cheerful. "Worked some things out with EDI."

The blue orb herself flickered to life beside him. "We had a very productive conversation."

"Really."

The commander grabbed the back of his chair and leaned over to speak in his ear. Her breath was warm against his neck, her voice low and playful. "I hope you don't have big plans tonight, because I think I've solved our interruption problem..."

It took all of his willpower to keep his face neutral and his attention on his screens while Rhi explained her deal with EDI, her face so close her lips occasionally brushed his ear. When she finished he was silent for a moment, absorbing the implications. His eyes slid as far sideways as possible, trying to see the expression of the woman standing behind him.

"Are you trying to tell me," he choked out, "Are you trying to tell me that EDI is my safe word?"

Shepard's sultry chuckle stayed with him long after she had left the bridge.

Shepard whistled as she went through her day. All in all, the chat with EDI had gone better than she expected. Weirder than she expected, sure, but at least the AI wasn't working on some devious plan. EDI just had... quirks. Quirks were normal. She could deal with quirks.

Just before dinner – when Joker would get off his shift, finally – she was accosted by Miranda, and they spent the meal exchanging ideas. When she was about to leave, Miranda said that Jacob had a request, and could she stop in to talk with him? Luckily Joker was in the mess when she left Lawson's quarters; she invited him to continue their interrupted 'tactical discussion' without so
much as an eyebrow twitch.

It occurred to her belatedly that there wasn't any real way for him to decline when she phrased it as a professional communication. Unless he'd had a huge change of heart in the last eight hours, it wouldn't be an issue tonight, but it was something to think about. For now, she'd talk with Jacob and still have time for a shower before Joker showed up at her quarters.

She agreed easily to Jacob's request; he wanted to look for signs of his lost father, in a sector they were heading through anyway. She'd already put it out of her mind as she climbed the maintenance ladder to her quarters, too full of energy to stand in the elevator. After a shower she looked around her already-spotless room for anything to tidy. *You're giddy about seeing a man you see every day, for most of the day. Fuck, girl.*

She couldn't help but grin when he arrived. She caught him while he was still on the stairs down from her office, so he was momentarily a step taller than she was, and kissed him before he could say anything.

*There. That gets the awkward part out of the way fast.*

Joker pulled away and raised an eyebrow.

"Just checking," she said, with a nod towards EDI's projector.

"For science," he agreed, and slipped his arms around her waist to kiss her again. When he ran his hands down over her hips her thigh-pocket gave a familiar crinkle.

He pulled back, staring at her incredulously. "You have *ration bars* in your *pocket*?"

"I always have ration bars in my pocket." She kissed the corner of his mouth. "I put the pistol on the table, though."

He stepped down to her level and pretended to frisk her. "Knives?"

"Well, duh. Not there, though."

He moved his hands back from legs to hips.

"Warmer."

And on up to her waist.

*Promising. C'mon, Joker. "Warmer."*

"Warmer."

His hands circled underneath her breasts, and he pushed one thumb up into the space between them, where maybe, just maybe, there could be a small knife. The thick fabric pressed down without impediment.

He kept a *nearly* straight face, but his eyes were laughing. "You are totally lying."

"Well, yeah." She grinned. "It's in my boot."

"Mmm. Tricky." To her delight, his hands stayed right where they were, one thumb stroking the curve of her breast – though, between uniform, undershirt, and bra, it really wasn't as nice as it could be. The thick molded material of the Cerberus uniform was seriously starting to annoy her.
Joker must have felt the same way. He unzipped her ship-suit top with one hand and untucked it with the other, faster than she'd have thought possible.

"You've had practice at this," she chided playfully.

"With Cerberus uniforms? Nope." He smirked. "Just thought about it a lot."

One of his hands worked its way back up to its previous position. She arched into the touch, so much more immediate without the thick barrier of the uniform.

He leaned in to whisper, "Like, a lot a lot," by her ear. "This specific uniform, too."

"Cerberus. I hate this uniform." She stepped back just enough to strip out of her undone top, tossing it on the couch.

Joker affected a look of wide-eyed innocence she didn't buy for a minute. "Don't hold back, Commander. Show those clothes who's boss!" When the rest of her clothing didn't immediately follow the uniform onto the couch, he asked plaintively, "Aw, c'mon. Those pants are totally jackasses. I know it."

He stepped closer and grabbed her hips again, but this time something felt… off. His hands were too heavy; he was letting his arms take his weight. When she shifted he almost stumbled, and she quickly put a hand under his elbow.

"Joker, are you alright?"

"No," he muttered, "You're still wearing a shirt."

"Cute." She nudged him back towards her bed. "What'd you do, wear yourself out in the gym? Jacob said you've been down there a lot."

He scowled, and she knew she shouldn't have mentioned that even if she didn't understand why.

"No," he said tersely, then sighed. "Shit, I don't know why. Some days my body just craps out on me. It doesn't send a note with an explanation."

"Then sit down."

"Take off your shirt?"

"Deal." She laughed and pulled the tank top over her head. He backed up to the bed so he didn't miss anything. The tense moment seemed to have passed, for now. Whatever it was. Go back and poke at it later. Don't ruin the moment.

She raised an eyebrow at his frank appraisal, sliding easily back into her habitual cool even standing in her uniform bottoms and sports bra. It was what she wore to work out, anyway. Joker wasn't seeing anything he couldn't have seen on the ship-wide cameras.

"Hey, come closer. I want to see the tattoo I inspired," he said.

She thought he'd forgotten that conversation. She stepped closer, turning so he could see her arm.

"Nice work."

She was inordinately glad he thought so. And speaking of tattoos… "My turn."
Joker rolled his eyes. "That's what this is about. You've only ever been interested in my ink."

"Caught!" she said. "You're right. This has all been an elaborate deception so I can finally discover your mysterious tattoos." She kicked off her boots, then sat down behind him and and reached around for the zip on his shirt, murmuring against his neck, "for purely artistic purposes, of course."

His agreeing "Of course!" was interrupted by a shudder when she nipped the back of his neck, and she smiled against his skin, the fine hairs tickling her lips.

Zip undone, she slipped her hand in over his chest, only to feel the smooth cotton of an undershirt. "Drat," she said.

Joker lost it. "Drat? Drat?" His laughter made it harder for her to untuck his over-shirt, but he helpfully shrugged out of it and tossed it aside. "Drat? You regularly out-cuss Zaeed. You called the Illusive Man a 'butt-fucking asshole. And the best you can do is drat?!"

"Tsk. Language! And enough distractions." She lightly kissed the tiny Normandy where it peeked out above his collar, removed his hat, then leaned back and pulled his T-shirt over his head.

She let out her breath in surprise.

She wasn't sure what she'd expected – badges, maybe, a scattering of random images like so many sailors picked up – but there was nothing random about Joker's ink. Black bands swept around his delts and across his shoulder blades, curving over and under each other before they came to sharp points, a broad collar that emphasized the width of his shoulders. Each section was a work of art in itself, a painting in monochrome and negative space. That was a constellation visible from Arcturus; any Alliance spacer knew that, but the old airplane? She traced its dual wings with one finger, the circular blur of the propeller.

"Sopwith Pup," he offered. "They were wood and cloth, y'know. And they fought in World War One."

What could she possibly say to that?

She pressed a kiss to the place where the cockpit would be, though it was obscured by those fragile wings. All those times she'd teased him about his tats, why hadn't she ever thought he might have his soul etched into his skin? Oh, Joker.

She followed the black shapes around the side of his shoulder, edging around to his front and finally straddling his legs to get a view of another biplane on his chest, careful to keep her weight on the bed. The curving forms didn't quite meet in the center over his sternum, and she realized that though the over-all effect was symmetrical, none of the shapes that made it up were.

She traced every edge, fingers light and reverent. He watched her, still as a statue, the entire time, until she finally raised her eyes to his. Then he kissed her, fiercely, before she could say anything, tangling his hand in her hair, lips hot on hers. She responded as if she could convey everything she couldn't quite get into words, show her thanks for everything he'd been willing to share with her, with her lips and tongue.

*I love him.* It seemed too obvious to be a revelation, but it felt too big to be a simple fact. Her chest was full, emotion enough to drown in, and she could only moan into his mouth.

They stopped almost as one and looked at each other, faces mere inches apart. She realized they were both waiting for EDI's regular interruption. She saw the moment when he realized it too, the
way the corners of his mouth pulled up, changing the outline of his beard, and laughed aloud.

The PA was silent; EDI kept her bargain.

When he kissed her this time, it was less desperate but no less intense. His hands were warm on her bare back; every touch a miracle to skin that had only felt clothes and armor for so long. Keeping her weight on her knees and not his thighs took a little concentration, but she'd pounded across battlefields with a small armory on her back; her quads could hold that position forever. It did mean she had to lean down a bit to kiss him, though, and that was what did them in. All it took was leaning forward a bit too eagerly, and Joker tumbled backward onto the bed with a thump. Rhi caught herself before she followed him, hands splayed on either side of his head, suddenly very aware that falling on him would have been a disaster.

"Shit, sorry!" She started to shift away, uncertain.

"Rhi-i-i…" he smiled up at her.

"Sorry." She leaned to one side and pulled her leg over. "I can be patient."

"That makes one of us," he wiggled his eyebrows. "Where d'you think you're going?" He caught her belt loop and tugged her down beside him.

"I don't want to be patient." She moved closer again, murmuring against his neck, "But… I already broke your arm once."

"Twice," he corrected.

"What?!
"

"Shit. I wasn't going to tell you that. You were saving my life at the time. It seemed like a fair trade."

Now she remembered it too vividly: flames exploding outward from the Normandy, yanking him bodily out of his chair. His gasped 'hey, watch the arm!' that she'd ignored as she hauled him to the escape pod.

She was strong, and with all her muscle she was damn heavy, and she never, ever wanted to hurt him. She didn't know where the lines were. She remembered the scowl when she'd mentioned his gym time, too. Walk softly, Rhi. She needed to know what to avoid, and she wanted to ask without triggering that unpredictable defensive streak.

And I want to know now, damn it. She was aware of every place they touched, and starting to think maybe she did hate her pants after all.

She took a deep breath and said, "So, show me. What's not okay… and what's hopefully much better than okay." She nestled closer to his neck, breathing in his scent, voice husky. "Just… show me what you want."

His breath caught. "That's… a pretty damn open invitation."

She pulled back enough to look in his eyes and grinned. "You know I've always been happy to let you drive."
Wow. Rowr.

Joker couldn't quite believe he'd heard that right. Shepard was still looking down at him, propped up on one elbow, her smile lighting up her face. Without looking from her eyes he could perfectly recall the taut muscles of her stomach, the unconscious grace with which she'd removed her tank top, the strength of her legs as she'd held herself above him. And she's just offered you whatever you want.

It was almost too much to believe, but he'd always been one to push his luck, so he said "Showing you all that… might take more than one class."

She didn't say anything, but her smile got wider.

Whatever you want.

He looked at her smile, open and eager and like she hadn't a care in the world, and thought I want to make you happy.

"First…" He pushed himself awkwardly back up and reached for the pins in her hair, freeing it to tumble down around her shoulders. Then he slipped his fingers under the bottom of her bra. Breath caught when he touched her skin, hers and his both.

She obediently lifted her arms and he pulled the bra off over her head. He stopped with it still stuck around her forearms, pinning them together, and explained which kinds of strain his bones could and couldn't take, illustrated with pressure on her arm and punctuated by kisses.

It took a lot of willpower not to look down at her bare breasts while he explained, but hey, he was an impressive guy. He did run his hands over them on the way back down, smiling at how quickly the nipple stiffened under his thumb.

He wasn't sure if she'd remember his lesson, but he was going to remember it for the rest of his life.

She gave a little gasp, but she let him choose where to go, as good as her word. He added some new information for every article of clothing he removed (mostly; he was at a loss for socks. He'd probably remember the limitations of his feet when he broke a toe; until then, screw it). Rhi trailed her fingers lightly over his shoulders, kissed whatever limb happened to be available, and shifted to allow better access to her clothing. She didn't ask questions beyond simple confirmation.

Of course. She knows all about breaking bones. She's usually trying to.

Her arms and legs were hard with muscle, but his fingers seemed coarse in comparison with her skin. Even the scars of the Lazarus project were hair-fine, delicate light lines against the warm brown. He almost let his hand trace one down her thigh, but remembered how little she liked to think of them and changed course at the last minute, brushing across the mark as if it wasn't there. Her skin shivered as he touched it, and the suspicion that she was having trouble controlling herself and letting him take the lead turned him on even more. How could anyone look at you and only see the cold hard commander? My god, you're beautiful. She quivered again as he demonstrated another of the weaknesses of his body on hers, pulling her underwear slowly off down her legs in the process. That had been the last thing he could think of to explain, and now she was leaning on her elbows looking up at him, naked and expectant and stunning.

He'd pulled off his boots earlier, but still wore his uniform pants – he'd undone the fly when they started getting uncomfortably tight – but that was okay. He'd known what he wanted for awhile, now.
She reached for him when he pushed her back down into the pillows, but he just kissed her outstretched hand and dragged his fingers down the velvet-soft skin of her inner thigh. Tempting, toying… He followed where his fingers had been with his mouth, sliding onto his stomach between her legs, and she shuddered. That was more than enough encouragement. He looped one arm around her thigh, pulling himself in closer, and stroked a finger down through her tight dark curls, exposing her for his tongue.

He'd been right, in his day-dreams. It really was an amazing thing to hear Shepard moan. He was fairly certain his name was in there somewhere, but she didn't say it clearly. He wouldn't have heard it clearly, anyway, with her thigh pressed to his ear and his thoughts entirely full of how she felt, smelled, and tasted. He ground into the bed, turned on by her pleasure. She writhed with it, entirely unselfconscious, reacting to the smallest movement of his tongue.

Then she gripped the top of his head with her hand and gasped out, "Joker. Jeff. Wait. Stop."

He froze, desperate to figure out what he'd done wrong, what she wanted, but all she asked was "Have - h-have you ever heard my music? Down in the CIC?" Her voice was ragged.

_The hell?_

"No." He shook his head 'no', too, just for the way it made her shudder, and just like that the hand on his head was urging him on instead of stopping him. He acceded with a will, until her hands were fisted in the sheets and her whole body shook, but when it passed her hand was back, gentle and insistent on his head.

_Oh, Shepard. You greedy, greedy girl._

He spared a mental scowl for his right hand, still with two fingers in a splint. Too bad he wasn't ambidextrous.

How lucky he was so damn _close_ to ambidextrous.

He was a little more awkward with his left hand, but not so much that he couldn't lick a finger or two and slip them inside to counter his tongue. She arched her back to meet him. There were no words in her moans, now, only her hand clenched in his hair, breathy gasps rising in pitch.

This time when she came he realized why she'd asked about the music. Lungs trained to yell across a battlefield could be _loud_, and her final scream filled the room. She finally lost all semblance of control, then, shuddering, shaking, then twisting away from him entirely and collapsing across the bed.

She was looking at him like she'd never seen him before. "Joker, that… you…" She trailed off, eyes wide, and closed her eyes as another spasm racked her. She curled up, mouth open, scream silent this time.

She fell back to the bed with a tiny 'oh.'

He crawled up behind her, curling into a spoon, grinning fit to split his face. He had never seen her so relaxed; she looked like she didn't have a bone in her body. It was wonderful – especially since it was his doing. He'd never felt so smug in his life, and he was pretty good at smug. Knowing that he could make the unflappable Commander Fucking Shepard totally lose control? Exhilarating didn't begin to describe it. She'd come undone, wild and senseless, for _him._

That was why, when she finally came to herself enough to realize that she hadn't reciprocated, he caught her hand and stopped her. "Relax. I'm patient."
"Buh," she said groggily. "Why?"

He nuzzled his face into her neck, where the waves of her sweaty hair were threatening to become true curls. "Because I'm a smug bastard," he whispered.

She was quiet a moment, then managed, "Huh?"

He grinned against her neck, pleased beyond belief that he'd managed to render her functionally non-verbal, and murmured, "I'm fairly certain I'll have more opportunities."

"Oh," she breathed out, and shuddered with another aftershock, shivering against him deliciously. "Yeah, you are a smug bastard. And you're right, too."

He slid an arm around her, and she grabbed his hand and held it loosely to her chest. He cupped her breast, felt her breathing slowly return to normal, and relaxed into her warmth, enjoying the opportunity to hold her close. Her heat soothed the aches in his legs; her silent company soothed his heart.

He could easily have fallen asleep there, far more happily than in his narrow bunk in the noisy crew quarters. Still, when her breathing slowed into sleep he tried to extricate himself.

The movement woke her. "Wha…?"

"Better go," he said, "Or someone's gonna notice my empty bunk."

"Shit. Yeah, that's probably smart." She wiggled back against him instead of letting him get up, though. The way her ass felt was almost enough to make him regret his earlier smug-bastard patience. It certainly didn't make getting out of bed any easier.

"Rhi…"

"Hmm? Yeaaaah, okay." She rolled over and held him tight for a minute, then pushed him gently out of bed.

Chapter End Notes

Aaand I've finally added the 'sex' part of the 'sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll.' Well, I shouldn't say 'the' sex part -- unlike the games, I have no intention of giving them one fateful tumble before they head off to Certain Doom. Good relationships (and good sex) take some time to develop.
Chapter 32

Shepard was awake and most of the way through a giant biotic breakfast by the time Joker dragged himself out of his rack and through the shower. Her slight jump and involuntary grin when he walked in almost made up for how hard it had been to leave her bed the night before. She recovered her normal poise almost immediately, but she looked more relaxed than she had in weeks. Or maybe he was flattering himself.

He sat across from her and stretched his stiff legs out under the table, brushing her calf with his. There was too much uniform in the way, especially after last night. Funny, everyone acted like unfulfilled anticipation was the strongest, but he'd had more vivid dreams with experience to go on than he'd had before. Judging by the way the muscles tensed in her leg when he touched her, she wasn't immune to the increased sexual tension, either.

Above the table she hid it perfectly."You look happy. Sleep well?" she asked, sipping her coffee.

"Not as well as I could've." Joker shrugged. *I can play the casual game too.* "So. What's on the agenda today, Bold Leader?" Confident that his neighbors were focused on their breakfast, he gave her his best undressing-eyes look, hoping for a reaction.

She just smirked and leaned back in her chair. "Checkin' out a distress beacon for Jacob. Doubt we'll actually do anything – maybe recover the black box. Should be easy." Her ankle glided up the inside of his calf.

He almost didn't register what she said, lost in a memory of her legs, soft brown skin decorated with delicate scars. When he did he winced. "You did not just say that."

"Superstitious, Joker?" She glanced around and said more loudly, "I'd knock on wood, but Donnelly's head's too far away."

"I heard that!" Donnelly shouted from the other end of the table.

"What?"

"I heard that *Commander Ma'am Sir.*"

Shepard snorted. "At ease, Donnelly."

Her booted foot thumped back to the ground, and Joker grinned into his coffee.

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*Never, never, never say 'the mission's going to be easy.' Damn it. Rhi knows that rule.*

Joker scrubbed a hand over his eyes. The scene playing out on the vid-feed had destroyed his good mood. The fighting was a cakewalk – Shepard wasn't even winded – but each minute revealed more of a horror.

*Hard to believe someone related to Jacob could, could... abuse those people like that.* His mind shied away from the word. *Jacob's practically the only sane one on this boat. He's so nice. Chalk*
one up for 'nurture' not 'nature' I guess.

Would the survivors ever recover from the brain damage brought on by the planet's toxic plant life? If they did, would they recover from the trauma? Would they even remember? Reduced to chattel for a petty megalomaniac. Well, the women were, anyway…the thought turned his stomach. Better if they'd all died in the crash. No. Don't think that. Rhi thinks they can recover. Or maybe she just really wants them to.

Having Shepard's voice in his ear was reassuring, even though he could hear the anger and disgust beneath her cool orders. He couldn't blame her. He wouldn't have stopped her from pulling the trigger if she'd wanted to, but this time it was Jacob who started to aim at his father, and Shepard who backed him down.

She stopped by the cockpit briefly when she returned to the ship to contact Alliance Command, but Miranda caught her before they could say two words to each other.

"The Alliance is on its way, Commander," Miranda reminded her. "We should go."

"They're two standard days out. You actually think we should just abandon those people again?" Shepard rested her hand on Joker's shoulder instead of his chair for once. He hoped she drew as much comfort from the contact as he did.

"But Jacob…"

"Jacob is helping down there," Shepard said, softly. "I don't think that's a bad thing." She sighed. "Hell knows it couldn't be much worse."

Usually Joker would point out that saying it couldn't get worse was just asking for trouble, but this… he shot a glance at Rhi. She looked tired. Not physically, but heart-tired. They all were. It was one thing to fight a distant and alien enemy; totally another to see the depths to which humans could go.

"I suppose you're right," Miranda sighed. "It's just..." she shuddered.

"Yeah," Shepard said, "We all want to be gone, Miranda. But until help's actually in-system, we'll do what we can. Go help Mordin get his gear into the shuttle. And tell Samara. Some of the survivors are violent; I want non-lethal biotic crowd control, just in case."

Miranda snapped into efficiency mode, clearly glad to have a job. "For as long as we'll be down there… that'll be grueling work, Shepard. Energy drinks, extra rations…"

"Bring what you need. Jack will spell you – and that won't be a problem."

Miranda took a deep breath. "Of course not, Commander."

They'd uncovered the mess mid-morning, local time, and Shepard spent the rest of Aeia's long 31 hour day making as many arrangements as possible for the stricken survivors. The Normandy supplied emergency rations and medical care; even Chakwas was dirt-side, working alongside Mordin, while Shepard and her biotic team did their best to contain the more violent survivors.

It made a long, boring day for those still on the Normandy, but he wasn't about to complain. Useless at the helm, Joker made EDI promise to alert him at the hint of anything going wrong ground-side and spent some time on physical therapy. The gym was disturbingly quiet. He'd finally gotten used to sharing it with Jacob – he kind of had to, if he wanted to work out at all – and now
the other man's absence was a reminder of the hell planet-side. He was eager to finish and seek out the normal noise of the crew deck.

"Hey, Joker!" Tali surprised him as he was leaving the head. "Come in here a minute."

He peered towards the observation deck that Kasumi had claimed as her own. Tali was standing in the doorway, beckoning. He squinted suspiciously but joined her.

Inside, Kasumi was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the couch, engrossed in something on her omnitool. Tali perched on her left and gestured for Joker to take the other side.

"What're you two doing?"

"Hiding," Tali said. "I don't think there's really anything I can do down there, and I feel so… so…"

"Yeah," he agreed. "You don't have to say it."

"And that's why I'm providing us all with a marvelous distraction!" Kasumi said. "Here, I've almost got it."

"Almost got what?"

"Pictures!"

He'd thought she'd forgotten about her threat to look up Rhi's baby pictures. *If they are hers. She threatened to find mine, too.* Kasumi spent so much time living in the past he almost expected her to ignore the present. She did like a vaguely illegal challenge, though. Why Tali was here was more confusing. He leaned around Kasumi and shot her a questioning look.

"Someone has to keep an eye on her," Tali said primly. She'd always been touchy about the thief being aboard; Quarians were often the first to be accused of theft whenever anything went missing.

Kasumi didn't seem to mind the implications. "Also, you love that levo-based cocktail I invented. Be honest."

Tali said "Shush," but she sat a little less carefully.

"Okay, so I haven't actually been able to find a baby picture – yet! Or even a cute kid picture with pig-tails." Kasumi shook her head. "Can't you just picture Shep in pigtails? Anyway, That stuff is probably in local storage somewhere on earth, if it exists, so I couldn't access it out here. *But* Cerberus already did the work for me. Miranda had a full file of images she shouldn't have had. All I had to do was get past her security – a walk in the park, by the way – and search for the earliest date. Behold, recruitment photo!"

Kasumi held out her omni-tool triumphantly. It projected a holo in the space above her arm. The grainy image rotated slowly mid-air, then stuttered back to its start point.

Joker bit his lip. Tali cocked her head to one side.

"Oh…" Kasumi said, "That's… not a recruitment photo."

"No shit."

"What…?" Tali asked tentatively.

"It's a mugshot," Joker answered. *Damn it.* This had started out as harmless fun. Now it felt like
betrayal. Whatever the hell was going on in that image, he'd rather have heard it from Rhi herself or not known at all.

The card reading "Shepard, Rhiannon," was clear despite the flicker. Joker stared at the miniature figure behind the name, searching the girl's face for signs of the woman she'd grow to be, trying to see past her youth and imagine her ten years older, with thick hair instead of a shaved head, a calm smile instead of a feral snarl. It was there, in her bone structure – bones too obvious on a fast growing and clearly underfed form. The orange jumpsuit was clearly meant for a bigger person, someone with some meat on their bones. Her shaved scalp was splashed with a tattoo the color of dirty blood. Her gaze followed someone off-picture, straining to keep them in view. Handcuffs locked her wrists to a pole behind her back. She looked terrified.

The holo spun again, and he found his voice. "Why's the quality so bad?"

"Judging from the data loss, it was partially erased. If you're not thorough enough, someone with the right tools can rebuild the file…" Kasumi had been frantically working on her 'tool. "I think I've got audio."

It was as crackly and interrupted as the image was. A dull voice read out her name, a number, a date.

"Relax, kid," a male voice said. "You're not going to jail." the voice was obscured by static for a moment. "…get her some food."

Another voice said "…kidding?"Followed by more static and "Little…bitme."

"Well, that's Shep alright," Kasumi said. "I'll have to ask if she was in for anything good."

"I have to go." Joker stood a little too abruptly and caught himself on the edge of the couch. Unintentional as it was, he felt like a sneak. "Check on the ground team. Later."

Tali caught up with him easily and stopped him before he reached the elevator. "You think she won't like what we saw." She cocked her head to one side. "I doubt she'll mind. She never tried to hide her past."

No, she just doesn't talk about it. It works the same way. He wondered what she'd told Tali that she hadn't told him. Quite a lot, probably – they'd been close on the SR1, and were closer now. "It just feels like the wrong way to learn. Cerberus goes back through old files. Normal people talk to each other."

Tali's eye-lights gleamed. "No one says you can't do both, Joker."

Was he imagining things, or was there a teasing note in her voice?

Tali leaned close and whispered, "If you want my advice, give her something."

Shit, Joker thought, panicked. Am I missing something here? What day is it?

"She has no idea how to deal with it," Tali continued, "She gets flustered! It's fun."

Joker's panic turned to glee as her words sunk in. "You're kidding."

"Not at all. She really, really isn't used to gifts." Tali giggled. "When I gave her that blanket I think she actually stuttered. It was adorable." She sighed. "And Shepard should have to be adorable flustered one some of the time."
"Tali," he said, "Don't get down. Just because sometimes some people describe you as adorable or, yeah, flustered…"

She glared at him.

"…They usually add 'and mean with a shotgun,' so, hey, bonus!"

"You know it!" she agreed, and turned to go.

It wasn't until the elevator doors closed that he realized there was something odd about Tali's whispered recommendation. **Why would she think I should do anything personal for Rhi? She can't know.** Shit, even I can't tell when Shepard's got her professional face on, and I was… he lost himself for a minute in pleasant reminiscence of just what he'd been up to the night before. **Up to my ears in my CO. If you couldn't be crude in the privacy of your own mind, where could you? The memory made him flush. He wanted to run his hands over every inch of her warm, scarred skin, to make sure that last night had been definitely for sure absolutely real and not one of his best dreams. You're right she'd said, when he suggested he'd have another opportunity.** **Pretty much a promise.**

He tamped down his grin to walk through the CIC. His pleasant reverie faded when he put his earpiece back in. He slumped in his chair. **Not tonight, though.** Shepard should have been asleep hours ago. The entire ground team had to be exhausted.

When their long range ladar picked up the signature of an alliance ship in-system, the weary teams returned to the *Normandy*. Shepard didn't even come up to the CIC; just issued orders over the radio. Break orbit and hit FTL before they were faced with authority and difficult questions.

He only saw her once that night, in the elevator, a bottle of strong liquor in her hand. He was headed for his rack, and she was long past due for hers.

She must have seen his worried look at the bottle. "Not for me," she said quickly, "for Jacob. Whether he thinks he needs it or not."

He made a silent 'oh' of understanding. "Where you headed?"

"Gym. Give him a chance to hit things. See if he'll spill a bit more than he would for Kelly."

"Sparring and alcohol?"

"Consecutively, not concurrently. The other choice was the armory."

"Oh. Yeah. Gym's definitely better." He paused, unsure of what to say in their brief window of solitude, then reached over and punched the emergency stop. "Hey, uh…" he didn't have the right words for this kind of thing – maybe no one did – but he could try. "That was absolute bullshit down there. I'm sorry."

He stepped close and wrapped his arms around her. She hugged back, whiskey bottle bumping against his side.

"Yeah, it was just… yeah." She leaned her head on his shoulder for a moment. "Easiest fight yet, and I want to sleep for a week."

He glanced down at the bottle again. "Soon?"

"Yeah. Soon. I just… don't want it to fester."
He leaned back enough to kiss the corner of her mouth. "Take care of yourself, too."

She squeezed him. "I will. But it's not my hurt. So," she reached around him to restart the elevator, "the sooner it's done, the sooner I sleep."

She kissed him lightly and stepped away, a professional meter apart by the times the doors opened.

Shepard planned for the mission at hand as she rode the elevator to the CIC. When they'd returned to the ship the day before Jacob had fired up the QEC to the Illusive Man, and she'd exercised her right as Commander to barge into conversations she wasn't invited to. She wasn't sure why she'd thought seeing more of that asshole was a good idea, but it turned out he wanted a word with her anyway.

Jacob and Miranda had walked out, shooting loaded glances at each other, leaving her alone with the image of the Illusive Man.

"Let me guess. You want me to clean up another of your 'little problems.'"

He hadn't acknowledged her barb. "One of our stations has gone dark. I'd like you to look into it."

"Have you considered it was probably fucked from within, like the rest of your projects?"

"The rest? Shepard, you have no idea about the scope of Cerberus operations. At best, you're judging from incomplete data."

She'd waved it away. Either his organization was far vaster than she thought, or their failure rate was spectacularly high. Arguing wouldn't make him admit anything either way. She'd agreed rather than prolong the conversation, then fled in search of booze (and met Joker in the elevator, which had been the only nice part of a very long day).

It'd been nice not to have to say anything. She'd have happily collapsed on him, but she'd remembered her oh-so-enjoyable lesson from the night before and been careful not to add more weight to his bones. Lessons... she licked her lips. She could still feel his hands gliding over her body, telling her what she needed to know while his touch took her breath away. She hadn't even gotten a chance to test her new skills – not that she was complaining. You always knew he had a quick tongue. The interior of the elevator reflected her self-satisfied grin.

Well, not self-satisfied. Her grin broadened. Focus on the mission, Shepard. You can come up with a list of One Hundred and One Things to Do With Your Pilot later. Or she could just cancel the drop. Sorry, Cerberus, was going to help you out but Joker gives amazing head. Priorities.


Yesterday the thought of solving the Illusive Man's problem rankled. This morning, refreshed and full of energy, it sounded like an excellent opportunity to really fuck up some Cerberus shit – in the guise of controlling another haywire experiment, of course. She knew who else would enjoy it, too.

"Chambers," she said as she strode into the CIC, "tell Jack to be ready for the drop. She's gonna like this one. Robson, Hadley," she nodded greetings to the starboard-side crew as she jogged past them.

Joker turned at the sound of her feet. "Sleep well?"
“Yeah, but a bit long. Someone tamper with my alarm?”

“At Mr. Moreau's request, Commander,” EDI answered.

She'd suspected as much. For anyone else it'd be an unallowable liberty, but she trusted his judgment, and that made it sweet.

Joker shrugged, unrepentant. "You looked awful last night."

"Thanks," she said wryly.

"Fishing for compliments? Not falling for that one, Shepard. You know what I meant."

She winked. "Can't blame me for trying."

"I want you well rested – I like it when you come back from your little field trips in one piece."

His manner was as flippant as usual, but the sentiment underneath it warmed her heart. She dropped her voice so she wouldn't be overheard by the navigator aft. "'Well rested' isn't the only way you want me, I hope.” She tried to keep her manner light.

"It's a start..." she couldn't see his grin because of the brim of his cap, but she could hear it in his voice.

She sighed. "Pity. I was going to ask you up after I got done with this little 'field trip', but by then I probably won't qualify as well rested anymore. Don't suppose you'd still be interested?"

"How could I refuse?"

That was like a splash of cold water to the face. She squatted down beside his chair. "You can always refuse," she said. "I put you in an awful situation last time when I made that 'tactics' discussion sound like an order, and I didn't realize it until I'd opened my mouth. I was just trying to be discreet – I didn't mean to leave you without a way out."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" He grabbed her hand. "Not what I meant."

"I know, but it's still –"

"A sign you're ethical despite all the shooting people, yeah. Believe me, Rhi," he dropped his voice low, "I'm totally capable of saying no, orders or not. And I don't want to." He grinned. "Besides, there's always stranding you planet-side if I get pissed, remember?"

She leaned on the side of his chair. "That's so reassuring."

"That's my girl."

That surprised her into a wide, involuntary smile. She looked up to see him smiling down at her with the same openness, and that was unexpected and wonderful too. Her smile broadened, eyes locked on his, sharing a joyful moment in the dubious semi-privacy of the cockpit. We're really doing this. Their hands were twined, hidden from the other crew by his chair. Joker cares about me. He knows and I know and it's wonderful.

I am becoming a total moron. And it's fantastic.

She pulled her gaze from his with a wrench, but she kept shooting glances at his goofy smile. Pull yourself together. "What's our ETA?"
"One hour." He almost sang it. "Shuttle?"

"Hammerhead. I have a rough map of the area. Facility looks pretty spread out."

"Whatcha want to bet its some eeevil experiment gone horribly and yet totally predictably awry?"

"Only idiots bet against a sure thing, Joker."

"Okay, I'll ask Chambers."

Rhi snorted despite herself. "She's not actually an idiot, you just don't like her."

"Oh, stop being all even-handed and reasonable and go kick some Cerberus ass for me."

She squeezed his hand. "Oh, my pleasure."

—

"Geth!" Shepard yelled.

"No fucking shit, Shepard!" Jack dove behind a cafeteria table as bullets sprayed the wall behind her, then sent a shockwave around the corner, knocking the geth platform out of position and into Garrus's line-of-fire.

"Thanks!" His slug took it at the juncture of head and body. The platform went down in a shower of sparks. "I love the smell of dying geth in the morning."

"Breakfast is served, my metal-bird-lizard friend."

Rhi smiled. Jack and Garrus hardly gave each other the time of day on the Normandy, but in the field they got along great.

"Shepard, on the balcony!"

"Got 'em. Watch my flank!" She stepped out of cover just long enough to get a bearing on her target, shoulders back, biotic energy already coursing through her body.

Her charge took her to the geth platform on the landing. Her shoulder hit it in the chest with a satisfying thunk and it staggered backwards. She took it out with one shot to its flashlight-face. Then she was up the stairs and sliding into the dubious protection of a large potted plant.

"Garrus!"

"On it!" A shower of sparks and the smell of burning electrics showed he'd brought down their shields.

"Three geth, all for you!" Her mnemonic was a stone-skipping motion, and the resulting wave of force did seem to skip along the ground like a stone over water. It picked up the three geth in quick succession, and the first two were hurled bodily over the railing, crashing to the floor below. The last had been too far away, or maybe her aim was off; it crashed into the railing instead, limbs akimbo.

She sprinted to the fallen geth. Her boot was on its neck when Garrus shouted "Thought you said three?"

"Yup." Bang. "That was three."
"Good to know you can still count that high, Shepard. You had me worried there for a minute."

"Oh, she can count, it's the biotics that need work!" shouted Jack.

From her vantage point on the balcony Rhi saw a flicker of movement; another geth trooper sneaking into Jack's six. She charged again, the swell of power lifting her almost off her feet before she hurtled through space to slam into the geth, catapulting it end-over-end. Garrus killed it almost idly.

"Need work, do they?" she asked. Her nerves crackled with power, the adrenaline fueled glee the move always brought, and it took a few breaths before she was able to contain the blue nimbus flickering over her body.

_Heh. Wow. Like coming down after Joker – no, girl, you're in the middle of a fight. No distractions._

_Damn, what a distraction, though._

"Fuck, Shepard, you're smiling like an idiot."

"You're just jealous you have to walk everywhere." She scanned the room for other hostiles, but it was quiet. A movement in the corner caught her eye, but it was just a surveillance camera. She shot it, just in case.

"What the hell are geth doing here, anyway?" Jack asked. "That Archer sap said they had a VI problem."

"Just a guess," Garrus drawled, "But I'd say Cerberus was trying to turn them into an unstoppable army."

"The fuck?"

"Rachni, thorian thralls, you– it's kind of their main plan," Shepard explained.

"Everyone needs a hobby," Garrus said.

"Fuckin A." Jack shook her head. "Let's get the fuck on with it. I want to blow something up."

"Sounds good to me. Move out!" They had to destroy that radio antenna before the VI beamed itself off-planet. Explosives were as good a solution as any. The VI's first target would be the off-world comm satellite, certainly, but what would be the next destination? She didn't know how a program made its choices, but she couldn't help but think a fully armed stealth frigate would look awfully tempting. She quickened her pace. _Cerberus screwing up their own people is one thing. They are not getting a chance at mine._ Dr. Gavin Archer flickered into being on the terminals around them as they ran. His nervous directions brought them to a tram and an agonizingly slow ride to the massive radio dish. _The view's beautiful, though._

The door opened and she charged onto a catwalk and into the fray.

Shepard's squad was fighting without banter, now, pressed by the larger numbers of geth and the urgency of stopping the VI. Joker watched intently, noting the smooth way they worked together. They were making short work of the enemy. Whether it would be short enough to cage the VI was another matter.
"EDI, if it gets to that comm satellite how fast can we take it out?"

"You would like me to engage the VI in cyber-warfare?"

"No, I want to blast the satellite form orbit." He glared at the orb. "Don't make it complicated!"

"I don't believe that will be necessary, Mr. Moreau."

"Shit, don't go all artificial-intelligence-solidarity on me now, EDI!"

"I was referring to the fact that Commander Shepard appears to have found something explosive."

"Whooo!" Rhi's shout of triumph rang in his ear and a bright flash blossomed on the vid.

"Oh. Yeah. That. Nevermind, EDI."

"Jack, Garrus! Shoot those things!"

Shepard's team became more focused, cutting through the geth as they sought out the antenna structure's weak spots, taking it in turns to guard each other's flanks as more geth appeared around them. Finally the last went off with a boom.

He heard the ominous groan just as Shepard said "Oh, you are fucking kidding me."

_SHIT! The whole thing's going down!_ He leaned forward, knuckles white. The vid feed shook. Garrus, Jack, and Shepard were all running back the way they'd come, pounding across the smooth surface of the dish. Shepard was the last to dive into the hatch, rolling onto the catwalk beneath and coming up into a run.

On the wall of the valley, they stopped and watched the dust settle. Shepard crossed her arms and looked out over the wreckage. "Cool."

Joker settled back in his chair. "Ay-yup." His long-suffering sigh was belied by his wide grin. "That's my girl."

Chapter End Notes

I've had a few notes asking if I'd be stopping AStSHB due to the unfortunate new canon revealed in ME3. Absolutely not. I knew that particular thing was coming for awhile, and I prefer the story the way it plays out in my head. AStSHB will finish at or near the end of ME2, which is what I've been planning all along. The slightly irregular updates are due to meatspace business, not lack of interest; thanks to all of you who have read through the chaos, and to my beta Tera Danielle, persevering despite all.
Chapter 33

Shepard whistled. "That's a big gun."

The hammerhead was paused on the wall of a valley overlooking the station below. The Cerberus 'facility' was actually a wrecked geth ship.

"I bet all the girls say that," Garrus said dryly.

"Quiet in the back seat," Jack flung back, "Or we'll turn this tank around."

"It's not a tank," Shepard said, "I don't care what the manual says. Anything that bursts into flame when you look at it funny is not a tank."

"Don't tell me you miss the mako," Garrus said.

Beside him, Tali moaned in remembered misery. Shepard had ordered her ground-side when she realized they'd be fighting more geth. The hammerhead, not roomy under usual conditions, was feeling decidedly cramped. When Garrus shifted to give Tali more room his knee stuck forward between Shepard and Jack.

"Yeah..." Rhi affected a dreamy voice for their amusement. She did kind of miss the mako, but she suspected it was mostly because a nostalgic haze dulled the remembered bruises and the shrill sound of Tali screaming quarian curses in her ear. You had to appreciate a vehicle that could drive straight up a mountain, though. The hammerhead was fancier, but it wasn't nearly as fun.

She squinted at the scene below them. Big guns took time to aim; the key was to be a moving target. They'd have to take out those shield generators, first.

"Who builds their shield pylons outside of the shielded area?" she asked the air.

"Someone who wants to keep something in," Tali responded. "It is a geth ship."

Rhi nodded. "That's why you're here. First we have to take down those shields --"

EDI interrupted her. "Commander, if I access the installation's communication satellite, I may be able to take control from the VI and deactivate the weapon remotely.

"Or get yourself taken over."

"I am built for cyber-warfare, Commander. I can defend my own integrity."

"Shut no, EDI," Joker sputtered, "You'd get infected!" Rhi smiled at the sound of his voice. He didn't usually leave the channel open unless he was actually speaking to her.

"Ah, Mr. Moreau. You care."

"Yeah. About my own ass!"

Well, that makes two of us. She grinned. "Okay, we'll do it the old fashioned way." She put the hammerhead in gear. "Fasten your seatbelts. Keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle. Do not exit unless it has come to a complete stop or catches fire."

"I'll be coming around with drinks shortly," Garrus added.
"Make mine a double," Tali muttered.

"Hang on!"

—

Joker settled back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. Jack and Shepard were stuffing their faces to make up for biotic energy expenditures, and he was fairly certain that Shepard had let Garrus drive between stations while she'd caught ten minutes' rest in the back-seat – at least, the hammerhead had traveled in a less hair-raising manner for a while. The team had been planet-side a long time, but they seemed well up to the sporadic fighting, and they were finally nearing their goal.

"Get ready," Shepard said on the radio, "I wouldn't be surprised if this button summoned a reaper."

He watched from Tali's feed, expecting an anti-climax. Instead Shepard staggered back from the console. Garrus lunged after her, talons out, but he wasn't fast enough, and she fell to her knees through the open door.

The doors slammed shut: Rhi on one side, her squad on the other.

"Tali, get that door open!" That was Garrus's shout. Shepard hadn't said a word, but her helmet feed showed she was up and moving.

"Shepard! What's going on?"

She didn't respond, to him or to the squad on the other side of the wall. She just raised her hand in front of her face, slowly turning it.

*Concussion?* No, she knew how to deal with that, and her hard suit would register it. *Drugs?*

She lurched towards the wall and slapped it, then looked at her hand again.

"*Talk* to me, Rhi."

When she finally answered her voice was raspy. Shaken. "Jeff, what do you see?"

She never used his given name on duty; hell, she hardly used it in private. She only called him Jeff when shit got heavy. He tried to ignore the growing chill and keep his voice calm.

"What do you mean, Commander?" Maybe formality would help ground them both. "I see the inside of the Normandy, Your vid-feed. The squad's."

"What do you see in mine?" it sounded urgent. She was looking at her own hand again.

"Uh… your hand?" Her behavior frightened him, and he hid it in flippancy. "Is this a 'how many fingers are you holding up?' kind of question?"

In the other channel Garrus and Jack argued nervously until Tali snapped at them, "Quiet! I need to focus!"

"Okay." Shepard ignored them all, took a deep breath, and turned away from the sealed door. Her pistol was out and ready. "That's another door. I'll check it out."

She paused then asked, "*It is* another door, right?"

"Rhi, what is going on?"
Shepard tried to shove the panic down, but it escaped the cold tight ball in her belly, showing itself in the speed of her breath, the waver in the gun she normally held so steadily.

Her world had become a glowing wire-frame. Light drew the walls, the doors, even her own body. It followed the contours of her hand. It flashed and pulsed, and the world she knew as real faded against the brightness. She saw things she was sure weren't real, grainy images of people she'd never seen before, and some she'd seen as corpses littering Atlas station.

The images didn't go away when she closed her eyes. That almost made her whimper, the harsh invasion of an always-private darkness. Joker's listening. Fall apart later. She had to keep it together.

It was hard, though, very hard to worry about his fear when she was terrified.

How was this possible? Was the problem her brain? Her eyes? The VI – no, the human, David, that scum Archer's brother – must be doing it. Must be. I haven't done nearly enough drugs for this to be a flashback.

Another geth flickered to life in front of her, a construct of glowing, flowing light that concealed the structure beneath – or suggested one where there was nothing. She'd stopped trying to figure out whether the things were real or in her mind when they started shooting at her. Even if it was only in her brain, that hurt.

And god damn it, if she couldn't shoot her way out of this problem, she might as well give up.

It's worked for everything else.

She shot it point-blank, the pistol round taking it square in the head, and slid sideways, looking for the next target. The room was round, massive columns maintaining an impenetrable shield around something in the center. The middle of the room was the only place she couldn't reach, so, she reasoned, that was where she wanted to be.

Her eyes were dry and painful; she realized she hadn't been blinking. She closed her eyes to wet them, and saw another geth approaching, painted in light on the inside of her lids. She didn't open her eyes to fire. One more down. She took the opportunity to pour shots into one of the power nodes maintaining the massive shield, and her strange not-vision showed it flickering out through her tightly shut eyes.

Except for the gunfire, it was a silent game. Joker had stopped speaking in her ear after the fifth time he'd asked for an explanation and gotten nothing (what was she supposed to tell him? I'm going insane? I'm under mind control? I don't know!). Geth came at her from all directions and she moved constantly, braving their fire to take them out, using the SMG, now, to plink away at the shield nodes, then running from another might-be-real-might-not geth.

Finally the last node winked out in a shower of sparks, and the wire-frame world disappeared as if a switch had been flipped.

She blinked into the sudden dimness, black after the world of light. The hallucination had been honest, at least. The room she saw now was the same in outline as the room-of-light had been. In the center hung a vision of horror; David Archer, mathematical savant, the latest guinea pig for Cerberus power games. As her eyes adjusted to the dark she saw more than she'd ever wanted to of cruelty.
She'd fought with her eyes closed. David's were open, held by metal claws. While she'd moved fluidly around the chamber he'd been pinned, suspended in mid-air by spikes through his limbs. She'd stayed silent; he'd had no choice, mouth stretched agape by metal tubes.

"What has he done to you?" she whispered, and then Doctor Gavin Archer came running through the doorway, yelling that she didn't understand, and she punched him in the face.

The feeling of her armored fist connecting with Gavin Archer's nose was a beautiful thing, but it wasn't even close to enough. The scientist rocked backward and fell to the ground, clutching his face.

"What the fuck do you think you could possibly say to justify this? To your own brother? I thought you used brain implants, jacked something into his head, but – what the flying fuck did you think you were doing? There are spikes through his arm!" She lost track of what she was shouting as she vented her fear at the scientist.

"No, no!" Archer was frantic to explain. "Not spikes, that would be horrible! Nerve signal receptors! They don't go all the way through the –"

"Shut. Up." She shoved him the rest of the way to the ground and left him there, jogging to the miserable figure at the room's center. He looked at her like she was salvation. She looked at him and had no idea how she could possibly free him without doubling the damage that had already been done. "Fuck," she said quietly, "We'll get you out of here, I swear, but I don't know –"

"Commander," Joker's voice cut smoothly into her muddled thoughts, "Mercer is inbound with Doctor Chakwas and Operative Miranda Lawson. ETA ten minutes. I streamed your vid-feed to them; they're already figuring out what to do."

Shepard heaved a sigh of relief. Oh, thank you, thank you. She looked up at David and murmured "Not long now."

He strained around the metal filling his mouth, and she could just barely make out 'thank you.'

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Joker waited outside the commander's door, fear making his stomach sour. What the hell went on down there? The sight of Archer's brother had been bad enough, but he still didn't have any explanation from Shepard about what had happened to her. She'd held together long enough to have a 'conversation' with Dr. Archer, but when her squad rejoined her she'd almost collapsed. She hadn't answered their questions, either, just walked silently back to the waiting shuttle, ignoring Garrus's worried demands for an explanation just as she'd ignored Joker's.

Finally Jack told Garrus to shut up in no uncertain terms. Any situation that made Jack protective of Shepard had to be strange indeed. She and Tali had sat on either side of the commander on the long, uncomfortable trip back to the Normandy. Neither had said a word.

Shepard should have talked to him, though. Hurt coiled through his fear for her. Why wouldn't she talk to him?

He tried the door again, with the same lack of result. This time frustration won out. "EDI," he said, "Can you unlock it?"

He expected to have to argue, but the AI surprised him. "Yes," she said, and added, "I think it is for the best."
Shit. Even EDI was concerned. His worry bubbled out in words, and he started talking before the door was half way-open. "Shit, I'm coming in. What the hell went on down there? Why wouldn't you answer me? What –" He stopped mid-sentence.

Rhi was walking slowly around her quarters, one hand out in front of her, brushing the railing, the fish tank, the bulkhead. When he entered she stopped and turned to face him. Her eyes were closed.

"Rhi. What… what the hell?"

She took a deep breath before she answered. "I… he…" she opened her eyes, then shut them again. "Can't trust my eyes," she mumbled.

He stepped forward and caught her outstretched hand, brushed his fingers lightly over her closed lids. "What happened at Atlas station?"

She swallowed. "I saw things. Like… like a holo schematic instead of the real world. From the moment I pushed that button to when I brought down the shields, it was all… lines. The walls, the geth, myself… everything. Even… even when I closed my eyes. I thought I was going insane."

He squeezed her hand.

"I talked to David Archer. Chakwas wanted him sedated, but damn it, I needed to know. Made him talk to me before she put him out. He hacked my eyes, Jeff. The bits of them that are fucking Cerberus tech. I'm part fucking robot and a sufficiently powerful computer can just…" she raised a hand and mimicked the motion of a marionette, "Do whatever the fuck they want."

No. No, no, no. He couldn't think of anything to say, so he moved to hug her, but she planted her palm on his chest and shoved him away. The force of the push took him by surprise and he staggered backward, grabbing at the wall for support, staring at her in hurt and confusion.

Her eyes flew open, as surprised as he was, horrified that she might have hurt him. She reflexively reached forward to support him but stopped before they touched, snatching her hands back. "Oh, god, I'm sorry. I don't, I didn't –"

"I'm not that breakable," he spat out. Tension made it angry when he'd meant to be reassuring. His ego wouldn't quite let him admit that if he hadn't caught his balance he'd be headed down to Chakwas and the medbay right now.

"Everyone is that breakable!" she snapped back. "Look!"

He followed the direction she pointed, but there was nothing there; just the metal bulkhead, brushed satin surface not quite as smooth as it should be. He tilted his head, looking at it more closely. It was dented.

He turned back to Shepard. She was standing awkwardly with her hands tucked into her armpits.

"Joker… I did that." She was almost quivering with tension. Her lip curled in disgust. "With my hand."

"Shit." His eyebrows shot up. "What'd the bulkhead ever do to you?"

"I was pissed." She shrugged, awkwardly, hands still tucked away. "I'd just found out the Illusive asshole set us up with the collector ship. Felt like I was about to explode."
Realization dawning. He remembered that night. Pissed indeed. "And then you went and took it out on a punching bag in the hangar."

She started to nod, but stopped, startled. "How do you know that?"

He looked at his feet. "I, uh… watched you." His feet weren't giving him any suggestions at all. "I was trying to avoid people. I was in the kodiak. Then you came in and I couldn't leave without you noticing, and, er…"

"So you saw," she breathed. "You saw me lose my temper. Fuck, I never used to do that. Now it happens all the time." She slumped against the fish tank. "And knowing what I can do when I lose control… what if it's not me? What if someone, something's making me lose it? Or whatever hacks my eyes next time uses them to show me stuff that isn't really there?" She squeezed her eyes tight shut again. "How can you trust me? I can't trust me."

"I saw," he said, walking slowly towards her. "I saw you take out your perfectly justified anger in a perfectly safe way. I saw you hide it so it wouldn't affect the crew. Just like I saw you keep going today." He gripped her shoulder and stepped close, close enough to tip up his head and brush his lips across her cheek, to whisper in her ear, "I know you're still you. And you'll have to be more than a super-powered cybernetic undead powerhouse to intimidate me."

She made a ragged sound part-way between a laugh and a sob and uncrossed her arms.

He captured the hand she reached tentatively towards him and kissed the knuckles. "Just like I told Alenko. If I was intimidated by everyone who could beat me to a pulp I'd never get out of bed in the morning."

"I think your sense of self-preservation may need calibrating."

"I'll ask Garrus about it." He smiled at her. "Sit down? It's been a long day."

"Be right there." She went to the head and he limped down to sit on her bed.

Shit, he was tired. The emotional strain was taking its toll, and he didn't think they were out of the asteroid field yet. His body's occasionally unreliable internal thermostat was acting up, too, so he stripped off his shirt and pulled his boots off. He laid back, closed his eyes, and listened to the water run, trying to imagine what she'd seen.

He opened his eyes when he felt her weight on the mattress. Her bare feet had been silent on the deck matting. She still didn't look good. Calmer, more controlled, but not happy. Nope, not out of the asteroids yet.

He pulled himself up to sit against the headboard. "Come 'ere."

She did, scooting back to sit between his straddled legs, but her shoulders were still straight and tense. He tugged her gently closer. Relax, Rhi. The muscles of her shoulders were rock hard with stress; his own ached in sympathy.

She started to lean back against his chest but stopped herself. "Is that okay?"

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her gently down. "Sure. Just don't move too fast. Or start head-banging or anything." With his other hand he worked gently at her neck. He couldn't exert enough pressure to really get into the knots, but anything to help her relax was worth a shot. She rolled her head to the other side to give him better access and sagged against him.
They were quiet awhile, looking up at the stars over her bed, and then she said, "It's still a problem, you know."

"What is?"

"The… security vulnerabilities of my new hardware." There was a hint of black humor in her dry tactical assessment.

She was right, of course. If he let himself stop and think about that it was terrifying, but she didn't need to know that. "Well, yeah. But it's not a problem tonight, or tomorrow."

"Hmph. How you figure?"

He shrugged, knowing she'd feel it even though she couldn't see it. "Range of transmission. You had to be right in the heart of the Atlas facility, right? Or else Archer would've done it sooner. And that was with all the who-knows-what they'd built to let him interface over distance with the geth. It's not like anyone can just send messages from anywhere – laws of physics. Even EDI needs a repeater to access another system if the Normandy's more than a few k away. And between Tali, Miranda, and EDI, if anyone was sending a whole buncha signals on the Normandy, we'd know."

"Unless it was Miranda or EDI who was –"

"Then Tali'd catch it. See? There's an upside to your crew distrusting each other."

"Ha."

"We're intersystem, now – there's nothing and no-one for light years. So it's not tonight's problem. Probably not tomorrow's."

She sighed. "You're right. It's just awful to think about. As soon as I start questioning what someone can do to me now, I wonder if it's already been done. Am I really the same person I was before Alchera? Would I know?"

He thought about it, and finally said "Well, you do swear more."

She snorted. "No I don't. I just do more of it in public."

"You never let me cuddle you half-naked in bed before."

There was a hint of a smile in her voice. "I wanted to."

"And I don't remember you getting high with any of the SR1 crew."

"No," she agreed, "We always saved it for shore-leave. And not with crew under my command. Jack is a… special case."

Joker, not quite as worldly as he'd wanted to come off, was struck by the admission. "Wait. You mean you did regularly get high in the Alliance?"

She tilted her head up at him with a fond you-are-so-naive look that changed into a pensive frown. "It's really not that uncommon among the marines. You get… get to where you can't relax, sometimes, after a bad mission or two. It's a safe way to calm down." She shrugged. "Pretty tame after the things I was around as a kid, anyway."

It was a perfect opening, a chance to learn more about her and remind her of her humanity, all in one. He wrapped his arms around her tighter. "About that…" he trailed off invitingly, but she didn't
"take the hint."

"What?"

"You don't talk about it much. When you were a kid, I mean." He thought a moment, and added, "Except that thing about rats," to be totally fair.

"It was only one rat, once!" She laughed. It was only a little laugh, but it was a sweet, sweet sound after the last tense hour.

"Okay, one rat. But I'm still curious."

She sighed, "About Ness and Trex and all that crap," and gently stroked the fingers of his right hand that had only recently been released from their splints. "You certainly deserve to know about the shit that almost got you blown up."

"Rhi," he chided, "I'm curious about you."

"You know I ran with a gang…"

"If I hadn't, the whole motorcycle-chase-scene might have given it away."

He felt her tense. Shit, wrong time to be flippant. He pulled her back up to him, arms snug around her waist. "Sorry, Rhi. Tell me."

He thought of all the conversations they'd had while one or the other of them stared off at the stars. *Easier to talk about real things if you can pretend you're talking to an empty room.*

"I hooked up with them early. Had to, after I ran away from 'care."

"Care?"

"Fostercare. Not the first time I ran away, just the first time it stuck. But being an eleven year old on your own doesn't work. The older kids… looked out for us. After a fashion and to a point. Littles were look-outs, scouts, they taught us how to keep away from the po and where the sec was loose, and you knew there was someone to watch while you slept, so you wouldn't wake up dead or gone. Eventually I was one of the older ones, and… Anyway. Hmm."

She shifted a little in his arms and made another thinking noise. It was a world away from the practiced ease with which she spun tales in the mess, always leaving out just enough info to make the crew beg for more. *She hasn't told this story often, he realized. Or at all.*

She settled again, back resting lightly against his chest. "Anyway. We were in the middle of a turf war. Not a one-off rumble, those happened all the time, that's how shit gets decided anytime people are too evenly matched. The real deal. And I was working my way up, too. Trex was the top dog, and, well, we didn't see eye to eye…" She snorted. "You may have gathered that. But he had two years and forty pounds on me and I wasn't ready to confront him, until… there were these littles I'd kinda adopted, sibs, and they weren't normal street kids. For starters, they were little littles. The younger one – Ness – musta been seven. And they were mine, but Trex used them for a job."

Damn, but she was possessive. And he loved her for it. Somehow everyone she claimed did.

"And Nessie was shot," she said flatly. "It was one of those stupid dumb-ass things that happen. No one meant to shoot her. Hell, she wasn't even supposed to be there, but she stuck to her older bro like glue. I still don't know who shot her, our side or theirs. Doesn't matter."
She was shot in the leg. Bad. You saw the scar in the vid message?" She craned her head around to see him, and he nodded. "We'd tied it all up as clean as we could, but we didn't know shit, and after a day and a bit it still bled. That kid looked bad. I wanted to bring her to the hospital; Trex said no. Once they see a gunshot they don't let anyone involved get out without questions, and he was sure we'd all be fucked. We almost fought it out right there. We started to, but it was too damn close, so I backed down. I only had one chance to beat him, and if I lost, Nessie would die. He had more back-up than me, anyway."

"So you decided you couldn't live like that if it meant kids died?"

"Hell, no." She snorted. "I didn't do any soul searching; I just waited 'till Trex was busy and stole Ness and her brother. God," she swept her hair back from her forehead, "I carried her half-way across the city, this scared little kid on my back, with her dirty blood all down my arm and through my shirt and her brother holding onto my belt-loop. S'not like you can take a gunshot kid on public transit.

The plan was to drop the kids in the ER and get away clean. I didn't want to get caught any more than Trex did. They'd be fine – they didn't have a record yet, they weren't flagged as trouble or anything. There was a good chance they'd end up somewhere alright."

She snorted again. "You know about plans, though."

"They all go to shit?"

"Bingo. They get fucked up. The place was packed, some accident or just a bad flu season. Maybe it was always like that. But I couldn't just dump her, this little kid, and expect someone to notice, so I shoved my way through to check-in and pretty much dropped her on the counter. Nessie was bleeding through everything I'd put on her, so it was real obvious, and suddenly I was getting a lot of attention."

When she was quiet for long enough he thought she wouldn't start again, he prompted her, murmuring into her hair. "What'd you do?"

"Ran. Or tried to. Squeezed past a bunch of people, hit some. Most people, when they see a disturbance, they try to get out of the way, so for a minute there it looked like I'd make it." She brushed a loose lock of hair back behind her ear and dropped her hand to his. "But there were these two off-duty military guys. Waitin' for their buddy. When I squirmed out of the first press of people the young one was square in my path, waiting for me. Didn't realize 'till later that was a pretty brave thing to do – I coulda been some crazed druggy with a knife, he was lucky it was just me. Mostly." She chuckled dryly. "My biotics had started to show by then, sporadically. Obviously I didn't have an amp or a clue or anything, but I was fucking desperate. Just threw it all at him and went for his knees. Knocked him on his ass."

*Mini-Shepard, covered in blood and bowling over the enemy.* He grinned to himself. *Why is that so easy to picture? "And?" The nuzzling was to help her remember. Really.*

"The old guy with 'im was his CO. N-something. He took me down so fast I didn't know what hit me. Had my belly on the floor and a knee on my back before I realized he was there." She tilted her head back onto his shoulder, trying to look up and read him. "Heh. He was my hand-to-hand instructor, later. Geltz. Bet the old man can still kick my ass…"

He held her and waited.

"Then it was questions, but not the questions I was expecting. I mean, yeah, the po wanted to know
about the bullet wound, but the alliance guys were so thrilled to have caught a feral biotic they kinda kept 'em off me. They wanted to know how old I was... that's a big deal. If you say you're legal, then whatever they charge you with sticks forever. But if you admit you're a kid, you get packed off to 'care again, and no way did I want that. I said I was eighteen. They didn't get that sorted out 'till after I'd been packed off to this boarding-school and fitted with an amp. Then there was some shit to work out, surgery without a legal adult guardian to give consent, et cetera ad nauseam, and they figured out some way to foot the bill for the school... they'd planned on me enlisting as soon as I got out of recovery, but I was over a year too young. Someone pulled strings and made 'em keep me at this place for a while. A sort of biotic academy, room'n'board, strict rules. BAaT had just been shut down, so it's not like there was a real clear place for a biotic kid. Anyway, they started teaching me to control my biotics and not to growl over my food."

"The Alliance taught you table manners?"

"Yeah, but not then. All the tricky stuff and proper English and shit I learned in Officer's Candidacy."

He chuckled. "You're amazing, you know? And that explains... um." He'd forgotten for a moment that he hadn't told her about their snooping. "Uh, remember Kasumi threatening to find your baby pictures?"

Rhi twisted around to look at him. "Yeah. She's welcome to try."

"Well, she found something. Not baby pictures. A mug-shot."

"I shouldn't have doubted Kasumi's dedication." She shook her head. "Had to be when when Geltz drug me in. Never was caught, otherwise."

"You should tell Kasumi. She'd be so proud." He hugged her tighter, remembering the feral, scrawny kid he'd seen in the fragmented holo, and she relaxed against his chest. Her back was warm through the thin fabric of her tank top. He was just thinking about how hard it was going to be to get up and go to his own cold bunk when she murmured his name.

"Yeah?"

"Stay here tonight."

He remembered all too clearly the way she'd thrashed in her nightmare and the sick crack of his breaking arm bone, but he could hardly say no after her earlier crisis of confidence. He didn't want to say no. "D'you move a lot in your sleep?"

"Not usually. Haven't had many nightmares lately, either." She sighed. "I should be worried about appearances, but hell, you're up half the night most of the time anyway. Is anyone really going to notice if you're not in your rack?"

"You might," he thought about saying, but he was too tired to follow through on any saucy comments, so he just muttered, "Eh, fuck 'em," and followed her under the covers. Eventually he drifted off, lulled by the slow even cadence of her sleeping breath.
Rhi woke before her alarm and lay still a moment before she slipped out of bed and padded to the head. She winced as she swished the morning-taste out of her mouth. Not the way she'd have wanted to ask a new lover to spend the night. *Hold me while I freak the fuck out.* She spat out the water. *Some undead marine you are.*

But... her new dread was legitimately worrying – not like that stupid fear of space she couldn't quite shake. Jeff already knew *that* weakness; hell, he'd seen more of her at her worst than just about anybody – and he was still here. He wasn't just some new lover, he was... him.

*How'd you want it to go, anyway? Did you want this to be some kind of perfect fairy tale? That shit's stupid.* She'd never asked anyone to stay. She'd always been the one waking up in a strange apartment the next morning – or, more often, leaving in the middle of the night.

She leaned on the door frame and watched him, a dark shape on one side of her rumpled bed, his hat a gleam of white on the bedside table, and she smiled. Screw perfect. *This* was the one thing that was really right in months.

She poured a glass of water and walked back, careful to be quiet. Shedding her pajama bottoms, she crawled back into bed, enjoying the warm comfort of the blankets and the deep, even sound of his breathing. He showed no signs of waking. He usually showed up late (and a bit groggy) for morning mess, so it wasn't much of a stretch to guess he was a late sleeper.

She molded her body to his, curling in against his back, her arm draped over his chest, and lay soaking in his scent and the warm comfort of his body. He shifted, once, and settled down further into the pillow.

It was nice for about five minutes, but she couldn't fall back to sleep.

Instead, she ran her hand down his chest, touch firm so it wouldn't tickle, then down over the slight beginning-of-a-belly that his uniform entirely hid. She thought it was adorable, and couldn't for the life of her explain *why.* She'd never mention it to him – he was self-conscious enough as it was – still. Adorable. She froze when he moved a bit in his sleep, but when his even breathing resumed so did her exploration, down through coarse hair until she could cup his balls in her fingers. He stiffened under her teasing thumb almost immediately, and shivered.

*But he was still asleep.*

*Come on.* She had this sliver of morning, and she wanted to share it. She kissed his neck, above the spot where the SR1 was tattooed, thinking that would wake him, but no such luck. She kept toying with him, running her thumb up his cock and thinking, *I'm really not a very good person.*

She'd wanted to give him a pleasant wake-up, but she was unprepared for her own reaction. The exquisite softness of the skin there aroused her almost as much as her touch was arousing him. She molded herself closer to his back, breathing in his smell through half open lips.

*“Mmm…”*

That wasn’t a sleep-sound. He stretched while his body thrust into her hand, then he looked down
and said, “Mmmfwhoa.”

She grinned. Not so verbal in the morning, her pilot.

He rolled his head back towards her, took a minute to focus, and added. “Wow.” It was punctuated by a shudder. He carefully shifted onto his back. It took him two tries to get his arm around her, and his eyes weren't quite all the way open yet. “Waz – mmm – dreaminz.” He yawned. “Ni-i-ice.”

She chuckled, amused at the fumbling of his normally quick tongue and distracted by the way his hip now shoved at her, pressure in just-almost the right spot. Her hand continued its slow movement and she lifted her leg over his thighs and settled – gently – down. She remembered her lesson in perfect detail, and as long as she didn't push off with that leg, it should be fine. Still, she watched him carefully before she settled the full weight on him.

He just smiled sleepily and reached down to stroke the line of her leg, fingers tickling along her skin up to her hip. He swallowed a few times before he managed his first actual sentence of the morning, which was, “Someone wakes up horny.”

She had to laugh. “Not always,” she said, “But I had this hot pilot in my bed.”

“S'all about the wings, isn't it?”

“Nah.” She kissed the line of his jaw, beard scratchy on her lips. “Your tongue's pretty impressive, too.”

From the quickened pulse under her hand he was as turned on by that memory as she was. She purred and pressed closer.

He turned his head to kiss her, thought better of it, and smacked his lips. “Uh…”

“Oh.” She carefully pulled her leg back and rolled away, stretching to reach the glass of water on the bedside table. “This what you're after?”

“Mm.” He took it gratefully, rolling onto his side to drink. After he'd swished the morning out of his mouth and set the glass aside he asked, “What time izit?”

She told him, and he groaned. “Shit, you're cruel.”

“No.” He reached up and kissed her, his fingers waking tingles in her skin. When he wiggled closer his erection prodded at her legs.

She scooted up a little to let it slide between her thighs and heard his breath catch. When she kissed him his moan mingled with hers.

“Not cruel,” he whispered, “unless you say we have to go to work right now.”

This how you want it to go? A quickie before you have to run off to work and hide it all from the crew? Her body answered an emphatic yes. Every little quiver shook them both, amplified and returned. They’d be able to take things more slowly later – or they wouldn’t, and this would be all the more precious.

The threats they faced loomed; collectors, reapers, Cerberus, and most immediately the mystery of the derelict reaper they were approaching at FTL speeds. She shoved them out of her mind and
pulled him close, sinking back down to the bed. There was an awkward moment while they tried to sort out who's arm went where, exactly – she didn't want to put too much weight on his, she ran into a pillow threading hers under his neck, and somehow there were far too many elbows for two people in one small space – but they sorted it out.

She kissed him to celebrate that accomplishment, nibbling his lower lip, and he surged against her. The soft/hard heat against her lips was torturous. When she opened her mouth to moan he caught her lower lip, returning the nibbling before kissing her deeply. Her world narrowed, far off concerns falling away to need, and she hooked her leg over his hip and lowered her hand to guide him, slowly.

She gasped when they connected, and his eyes flew open. She held him there for a moment on the verge, suddenly very aware that it had been a long time ago and almost a different body when she last took someone to bed – and it had been ‘just someone’, not… she looked into his eyes, savoring the knowledge that it was Joker, Jeff, her pilot who was laying here with her. Who I love, she thought, remembering that amazing realization.

Then he kissed her softly, sweetly, lips trembling against hers.

She shifted to find the right angle and moved her hand away, letting him sink into her, closing her eyes to focus on sensation. It felt good, so good, that last little distance between them slowly closing until they lay skin-to-skin. She tangled her hand in his hair and lay still a moment, aware of every inch of him, until not moving was unbearable.

They started to move at the same time, but not as one, new to each other and not in tune. They were both fast learners, though, and adapted quickly. He even smiled at the momentary awkwardness, a little acknowledgment of all the inherent absurdity of sex that made her love him all the more. She pulled herself close with the leg she'd wrapped 'round him and he bent his leg a bit for leverage and this time it worked, bodies moving against each other, never parting.

She lost herself in it, the slide of her breasts against his chest, his hands on her back and in her hair, the indescribable feeling of him moving within her. Their kisses went from slow and sensuous to wild, then she had to abandon his mouth just to breathe and he moaned her name in her ear. She clutched him tighter in response, muscles clenching around him, panting against his neck while her nails left a track in his shoulder.

She wanted more. It was maddening. She could feel him everywhere she wanted, exactly where she wanted, but on her side she couldn't move fast enough. Without thinking, she did what she would have done with anyone else in that position. He was already leaning back a little, and she shoved him the rest of the way over, rolling astride him and – she caught herself just before she let her weight sink back down, and froze. Fuck!

“Don't – dare – stop!” He grabbed her hips, pulling her down. “Just –” Whatever he'd been going to say was lost in a gasp and sigh, but his hands were eloquent enough, guiding her to slide instead of bounce.

She leaned forward, hands on either side of his head, so very, frustratingly close. Maybe that pathetic whimper actually escaped her mouth, because he levered himself up enough to swirl his tongue around her nipple, beard scratching the delicate skin. She rocked into it until she came screaming and had to pull away from his mouth, letting the sound carry her over the edge.

She'd never liked the word 'climax.' It sounded so final, like there'd only be one, and that'd be a fucking waste. When she returned to herself she started to move again, slowly, almost lazily. His gaze traveled her body, smiling his appreciation, and she stretched for him. His eyes followed the
movement, bright gleams in the dim light, until something she did was finally too much and he closed his eyes and arched his back, begging her with his body to move faster.

She was happy to oblige. He was close, and he bit his lip when he came. She watched his face, memorizing every second, and slipped her hand down to give herself that last little bit she so desperately wanted. They shuddered together, riding it out, his hands clutching her hips, until she tumbled beside him amid the blankets.

They were lying there, sweaty and entangled, when her alarm went off and the bedside lamp faded on.

He smiled at her. “Good morning.”

His hair was sticking out in ten different directions and there was a finger-nail track on his chest she didn’t remember leaving. They both smelled deliciously of mingled sweat and sex.

She laughed. “Good morning to you, too.”

Joker leaned on the conference table, unusually awake for the hour, as Shepard gave the final mission briefing.

The prior day had floated by in a pleasant haze until Shepard ordered the team to hit the sack so they’d be rested for their early-morning rendezvous with the dead reaper. Alone in his rack he’d kept his fears for the upcoming mission at bay by reliving the morning. Now they were less than two hours out from Mnemosyne and its ominous satellite. He’d take the helm from Mercer when they dropped back to conventional drives; for the moment they were safe in FTL.

Shepard dismissed Garrus to go armor up, but gestured for him and Miranda to hang back.

“Joker. One more thing.”

She’d already ordered him to leave her to her fate if he had a chance for a shot at the collector ship; what could possibly be worse than that? “Shoot.”

“Check in on my vid feed. If… I need to know if what I describe isn't what you see.”

His eyes flicked to Miranda, surprised that Rhi would admit that potential weakness around a Cerberus operative.

Shepard waved a hand reassuringly. “Miranda knows my… specs… better than anyone,” a slight tightening around her eyes was the only indication of how distasteful she found the subject. “I asked her to investigate the security weakness I discovered at Atlas station. Unfortunately she hasn't been able to suggest a solution.”

“Shepard, I –“

“Easy, Miranda. You've had less than twenty-four hours. I didn't expect a miracle.”

After all, it took two years for her to work the last one. Huh. Maybe he should be nicer to Operative Lawson – she had brought Shepard back to life. I should buy her flowers or a nice bottle of wine or catsuit-polish or something. As a thank-you.

“I’ll keep working on it,” Miranda said. “Believe me, Shepard, if I'd known this type of hacking
was a possibility I would have developed a different solution during the initial reconstruction.”

“Of course.” Shepard's mouth twisted up in a wry one-sided grin. “A control chip's one thing. Leaving it open for anyone to use? That's just bad planning.”

Joker expected Miranda to bristle at that, despite the humor in Rhi's voice, but she merely shrugged. “Obviously.” She tapped the table idly, thinking out loud. “With more time, perhaps we could set up some kind of counter-measure – or even replace your eyes with pure cloned biologicals – but since the optic implant signal is passive, there's nothing to turn off.”

“Without making me blind.” Shepard didn’t react at all to the mention of replacing her eyes. Joker was impressed.

“Well, yes.”

“Then we stay on our guard. We know from David Archer that exploiting that weakness takes heavy computing power, a strong signaling device, and a mind to direct it. I'll be aboard – inside – a reaper. They have all three.”

“It's a derelict,” Miranda assured.

“Or a corpse.” Shepard narrowed her eyes. “I'm not entirely sure where the line is. These things can wait for 50,000 years in dark space; I'm not going to believe it's actually dead unless I see it pulverized and fed to a varren.”

“Better have a lot of varren,” Joker muttered.

“And even then –“

“Indoctrinated by varren shit?”

Miranda glared at him.

“So.” Shepard seemed to ignore them both, but he knew she was amused. “Keep an eye on the feed – I'll check in. Can't have you distracted if we get company, so if it looks bad, call,” she paused for a moment, thinking, “Tali, to talk me through. If it never comes up, we don't have to mention it outside this room.”

He raised his eyebrows. Why secrecy now? She hated that crap.

She saw the look and shrugged. “People're on edge enough. No need to worry them more.” She snorted. “Hell, if my CO'd told me a shit story like this I'd probably have taken it up with the med officer and tried to get them sidelined.” She looked between him and Miranda as if expecting them to realize that was a great idea and send her back to her quarters. “All clear?”

He nodded.

“I approve of extra precaution, of course, Shepard, but Garrus and I will be with you. We'll be able to intercede if there is actually a problem.”

He caught Rhi's eye, sharing the unspoken thought that Miranda didn't really know what she was dealing with.

“No,” Shepard said. “Lesson one, Miranda. Don't trust anyone close to a reaper.”

“Even if it’s been through the intestinal tract of a varren,” Joker added.
Shepard was snapping the last armored plate into place on her shoulder when the *Normandy*’s deck rocked under feet.

“What was that?” Miranda was donning her armor, less used to the process and therefore slower. The armor was black and almost as sleek as her normal form-fitting attire. It was the bare minimum in terms of combat protection but still functional as a self-contained pressure and environmental suit – as long as the wearer didn’t expect to survive in space for more than half an hour or so.

Miranda hated it. Rhi suspected she had a touch of claustrophobia, which helmets triggered for some people, but of course Miranda’d never admit it. At least she hadn’t argued when Shepard had insisted on the full suit. The Cerberus reports claimed that the derelict had been re-pressurized for shirt-sleeves work, but she didn’t trust it to *stay* that way.

“Don’t know, it –“ the ship lurched again. “I’ll go find out. Meet at the lock.” She took off at a run for the cockpit, arm outstretched to help keep her balance on the now wildly moving ship. She skidded to a stop behind the pilot’s chair and braced herself on the back. “Joker! What’s with all the chop?”

“Doin’ my best – huge winds off the brown dwarf. Gusts to 500 kph – she can’t –” he cut himself short, reacting to another buffet. “There's a second ship alongside the reaper, it – EDI!”

“Of course, Mr. Moreau.”

Shepard clung to the back of the chair, legs braced, and looked at the silhouette EDI painted on the side-monitor with their ladar data. “That ship looks *geth*. Three guesses why the Cerberus science team isn't reporting in.” *Unexpected, still...* “I’d rather see that than a collector ship. We can deal with *geth*. If you can dock in this –”

Just as she said it, the turmoil disappeared. “What was that?”

“The reaper's mass effect fields are still active – otherwise an orbit this low would have decayed ages ago. We just passed inside its envelope.”

She glanced up at the window and the looming shape of the reaper. “It extends this far out?”

“No one ever said they were weak...” He shook his head. “Uh, Commander?”

“Yeah?”

His look at her spoke volumes. “Be careful in there.”

They locked onto the Cerberus lab ship easily enough. She was relieved to feel the *Normandy*'s clamps disengage; she'd be more comfortable with her ship safely out to space and as many of her people as possible far from the reaper.

The first thing they noticed on the Cerberus vessel was quiet; the second, blood.

“No bodies, though.” She motioned Garrus to take point. “Miranda, see what you can get from their logs.”

“Bunch of superstitious fluff,” Lawson muttered.
“No. Replay that section.” Shepard leaned over Miranda's shoulder while the log played. “Not superstition; it's the reaper at work. Benezia – the matriarch working with Saren? – talked about the same shit.”

“It's a derelict,” Miranda said, but she didn't sound entirely convinced.

“Uh huh,” Shepard answered. She was already moving down the corridor.

The team had just gone through the lock from the Cerberus lab to the reaper itself when half of Joker's screens lit up red. Shepard was on the comm almost immediately demanding an explanation.

“The reaper just threw up kinetic barriers – I don't think we can get through from our side. Bringing down Sovereign's took most of the fifth fleet.” And he wasn't going to shoot at the ship she was on.

“We’ll have to disable ‘em from in here.”

“I am sending the probable coordinates of the reaper’s mass effect core, Shepard,” EDI said. “Be advised, it is also maintaining the reaper’s altitude.”

“So when we take it out we fall into the planet.”

“And, y'know, die.”

“So we have to be quick,” she said calmly. “If anyone can get us off this wreck before it reaches crush-depth, it’s you, Joker.” She gestured for the team to move out. “We’ll sweep for survivors, the IFF, and any data we can grab, then make for the core.”

“Good hunting, Commander.”

With each bit of evidence that the crew had been indoctrinated, Shepard's manner had become calmer. Now she was cold as ice. In an expressionless near-monotone she started describing what she saw: the signs of struggle, the layout, the design differences between the Cerberus vessel and the reaper. He tried not to think about why she was doing it, and instead focused on the job, quietly affirming that he saw the same things she did. It was interesting, on a detached, intellectual level; if it were him, he'd have described different things. What she said matched what he saw in the feed, though, and that was good enough.

And no collector ship in sight. If only she wasn't trapped on a fucking reaper, this'd be going okay.

There were bodies to go with the blood, now, mangled and sprawled on the platforms that Cerberus had built to get around the reaper’s interior. The squad ignored them after a cursory look at their injuries.

“Doesn’t look like they were killed by geth,” Garrus pointed out.

“Husks, 5 o’clock!” Shepard’s warning was almost an answer. “They’re climbing the sides. Watch for flankers.”

“Roger.” Garrus dropped back, rifle out.

Zombies again. Shit. Shepard had faced them before, of course, but that whole ‘being inside a dead
reaper thing’ upped the creep-factor by about a zillion – as did the fact that the husks were climbing up the walls.

In the corner of the vid Shepard’s hand flashed in a mnemonic and a wave of energy pushed the husks off the platform ledge and back into the depths of the reaper.

Okay. Maybe the climbing-the-walls thing isn’t so bad after all. Shepard and Miranda between them were hurling husks bodily off the platform, blue energy crackling as they let gravity do their work for them. Behind them Garrus watched for flankers and picked off any they missed.

Ahead of them a husk fell to a shot from farther within the reaper.

“Sniper!” Miranda shouted. “Maybe a survivor from the Cerberus team.”

“Given what we saw on those recordings, I’m not sure I want to meet any survivors,” Garrus said.

“They’re aiming at the right targets,” Shepard said. “That’s good enough for now.”

“Right targets being 'things that aren't you,’” Joker said.

“That’s usually my definition, but sometimes Shepard gets a bit picky,” Garrus agreed.

When they reached the spot where the husk had fallen and turned the corner, the mysterious shooter was gone. A new swarm of husks filled the space where their benefactor must have been. The squad fell silent except for necessary warnings and occasional exclamations of satisfaction or disgust. Even over the radio the sound of their gunfire was strange, echoing oddly off the inside of the reaper.

“Fall back!” More were coming, crawling up and over the edges in moaning waves, and the team beat a fighting retreat back into the narrower passageway.

“Cover me.” Shepard had switched to her shotgun. The feed started to flicker blue and Joker averted his eyes just before the disorienting charge that brought her face-to-skull with one of the husks. She gained back their lost ground while Garrus and Miranda held the choke-point.

Then the screen went black.

“Shepard!” Joker switched to Garrus’s vid. Shepard’s camera hadn’t died; it had been obscured. One of the husks had snuck up behind her and wrapped an arm around her neck. Joker’s mouth was dry with fear. He could hear Rhi panting in his earpiece.

Garrus started running towards her, unable to shoot into such close quarters. Before he reached her Shepard threw herself backwards against a crate, smashing the husk between the metal and her armor, then reached back and heaved it over her head and to the floor, shouting with exertion. Joker switched back to her feed in time to see her foot come down on its neck with a disgusting (but very satisfying) squish-crunch.

Joker let out his breath.

“I’m okay.” She scanned the room. “Looks like the last of them.”

“Shepard…” Garrus growled and pointed at the far end of the chamber.

“I see ‘em.” She described the scene for Joker. “Giant spikes. Like we saw on Eden Prime and… that other backwater planet.”
“Trebin,” he supplied.

“Right, Trebin. They’re husk-makers. Three have bodies on them.” She holstered her shotgun and fitted the inferno attachment to her pistol, then took aim at the corpses. It took more than one shot for the super-heated slugs to set the bodies alight. She waited until they were burning before she turned away.

“Decency for the dead,” Garrus said.

“We don’t need more husks.”

Miranda was silent. Joker couldn’t blame her. She’s never seen indoctrination before. When they first realized that some people had apparently impaled themselves voluntarily, the entire Normandy had been that quiet. Silence was the sound of horror.

They left the burning bodies behind them and proceeded through another lock into a different section of the wreck. As they waited for it to cycle a cheerful recorded voice informed them, “We have gone five days without a workplace death.”

The team froze.

“Was that intended to sound reassuring?” Garrus asked.

Miranda shifted uncomfortably. “It’s probably supposed to say ‘injury.’ I’m sure it’s just a VI reacting outside of its parameters –“

“Oh, I don’t know, death seems fairly common in your operations. Cerberus doesn’t have the best safety record, Miranda.”

“Can it. Lock’s opening.” Shepard strode out, weapon at the ready. Garrus and Miranda fanned out behind her, and they advanced into the empty room.

Apparently empty room. A shot whistled by Shepard’s right ear. She hit the deck and rolled. Another shot passed through the place she’d just been and shattered the skull of a husk that had been creeping up behind her. Another husk lay on the ground, victim of the first shot.

“There’s our sniper!” Garrus shouted.

Shepard looked up from where she lay. The figure holding the sniper rifle was back lit, but there was no mistaking the distinctive silhouette of a geth.

“Joker,” she sounded uncertain for the first time, “I see a geth with a sniper rifle that may have just saved my life. And two dead husks.”

“Uh… not sure if it makes it better, Commander, but I see that too.”

The thing cocked its flashlight head to the side and spoke, an odd composite-mechanical voice. “Shepard-commander.” When it turned and walked away light flashed on the bright red and white stripe of a piece of N7 armor.

Shepard was still lying on the floor, staring at the space it had been. “It talked.”

Garrus leaned over and offered his three-taloned hand to pull her up. “I didn’t think they talked – or operated alone. They get smarter the more of them there are.”

“Occam’s razor,” Miranda said, “There must be more around.”
“Let me know when you figure out why it talked to me,” Shepard muttered. “Move out.”

More husks emerged as they continued. The research team must have been big. Their moaning was hideous, but better than than silently sneaking up on Rhi again. The squad was more careful of that than they’d been, reflexively checking behind them. Despite the amount of enemies there were no more close calls. As long as they kept them at range the husks made easy targets, and it was more slaughter than fight.

In a hallway they found a Cerberus research terminal. Sitting atop it was the reaper’s IFF, neatly packaged and sealed.

“Nice of ‘em to label it,” Shepard said. “Contains one Identify Friend/Foe device salvaged on – hey, that’s only eight days ago – from an inoperative synthetic being slash star-ship,” she read the slash, “in low-altitude orbit of the brown dwarf Mnemosyne – a whole bunch of co-ordinates, hoop hum – in the Thorne system. And a serial number.”

“Proper organization is crucial in any research endeavor,” Miranda said primly.

“I’m not complaining. You think I’d recognize a reaper IFF on sight? Looks like a thingamajig to me. Come on. We’re close to the core. Right, EDI?”

“Based on my readings it is beyond the next airlock. That is only an estimate, of course.”

Close enough. Joker opened the PA channel and told the crew to buckle up. “Full restraints, people. When this thing goes it’s gonna get hairy.” With one hand he triggered his station’s safety systems. The automatic belts slithered into place across his lap and chest. “Ready when you are, Commander.”

The lock cycled open to reveal the mass effect drive core, a huge orb of energy. Below it was a control interface, and at the interface was the mysterious geth.

There was only one geth, but there were a lot of husks. For the moment they were focused on the geth at the control panel, not Shepard’s squad, and they made the most of it, taking out a clump of them in one volley. At the sound the geth realized its danger and turned, shooting at the approaching husks with quick mechanical precision. The husks were everywhere, though, moving too erratically to count. A group charged Shepard’s team, and by the time they’d disposed of them, the geth had been felled.

Shepard hurled a ball of biotic energy at the husks around the geth, pulling them through the air toward her. To her right a second burst of blue must have been Miranda. The two fields met in mid-air with a detonation that whited-out the camera for a moment. When he could see them again Shepard was down on a side level, fighting a new wave of husks. When the one in front of her fell she whirled, looking back at the center of the room and the massive drive core.

“Joker! Big fucking eezo core. Glowing. Really there, yeah?”

“Affirmative, Commander.”

“Cool. Gonna shoot it.” Shepard pulled the Cain off her back, checking the ammo levels, then wheeled and kicked a husk that had crept up on her. “Garrus! Keep ‘em off me!”

She leaned back – bracing herself against something, probably – and brought the Cain to bear.

The explosion was bright enough to white-out the vid screen again, but Joker wasn’t watching anymore. With the destruction of the reaper’s mass effect core the protected bubble of calm around
the *Normandy* vanished. The ship bucked, tossed by the suddenly re-established winds of looming Mnemosyne, and he fought to maintain the *Normandy*’s position relative to the reaper. “C’mon, baby, fly for me, easy…” it was a low chant. In his earpiece he could hear the squad arguing over the corpse of the geth, followed by a grunt from Garrus and a muttered “If this thing starts to light up, give me some warning so I can drop it *before* you shoot, okay?”

His eyes he saved for the *Normandy* and the swiftly falling reaper. “C’mon, baby, ride the wind.”

Now he heard pounding footsteps and panting breath. The squad was finally moving. They were bringing the geth back. *Why* were they bringing the geth back? Screw long-term risk/reward calculation; it had to be slowing them down, and that could mean death *soon*. *At least Rhi isn’t carrying it.* He felt briefly guilty for caring less about Garrus’s survival, but the turian would understand. *Who cares about the damn geth? Get out of there, Rhi!* He was talking to her as well as the *Normandy*, now, a litany of *c’mon, babe, you can do it, run, come back to me*, in the same low voice he spoke to the ship. He didn’t – couldn’t – look at her, not and do his job, too. *And my job is getting her safely off of that thing.*

“Open the port airlock!”

He obeyed, coaxing the *Normandy* as close to the hulk as he dared, holding her *under* the reaper, between the derelict and Mnemosyne. He wasn’t going to be able to get a clamp connection, but he could at least make gravity *help*.

He spared a quick glance at Shepard’s feed. She and Garrus flung the geth platform aboard and Miranda leapt the gap after it. Shepard turned to lay down cover fire, beating back the husks that chased them.

Just as she turned to follow Garrus another gust of wind hit them and the *Normandy* shied away, putting another meter of distance between it and the reaper. Joker fought her back into position, trying to narrow the gap, but they were lower in the atmosphere now, the winds fiercer, and the reaper falling faster.

Shepard’s cam view froze, staring at the open space between the reaper and the ship. Joker started his chant again, not even remembering whether her channel was open or not. *Jump, Rhi.* “C’mon, babe. I’ll catch you, just jump. Come on home.”

A moan heralded another wave of husks behind her. Shepard backed up a meter, ran, and leapt.

She seemed to hang in the air impossibly long, falling even as the reaper fell, but she’d shoved off and it hadn’t, and finally she fetched up with a *thunk* inside the *Normandy*’s airlock. Garrus shouted the all clear and Joker gratefully pulled the *Normandy* away, speeding away into the safety of open space with his precious cargo.

**Chapter End Notes**

This chapter was really difficult and took more than one rewrite -- partly because of the sex scene, partly because I was covering an in-game mission, and finding a decent balance where the reader can follow it without it becoming a boring recap is quite a challenge. (But mostly it was the sex scene. Those are hard).
Chapter 35

Miranda and Jacob were still discussing the disabled geth as they left the meeting room. Miranda wanted to send it to the Illusive Man; Jacob wanted to send it out the nearest airlock. If Shepard had to decide between the two she'd have sided with Jacob, but that said more about her feelings towards the Illusive Man than her concerns about the geth. If she had to decide whether to give the Puppet Bastard a present or space the package, it'd be airlock every time. The geth, though… the geth made her curious.

A cheer went up from the crew stationed in the CIC when they entered. Miranda paused, taken aback, but Shepard rolled with it, holding up a fist, acknowledging their victory. She hadn't expected the festival mood, but she wasn't about to waste the opportunity.

“But what—“ Miranda started to ask.

She responded quietly, for Miranda's ears alone. “First real progress towards beating the collectors. We're heading the right direction, now.”

“It was a pretty small victory. We're going to need a lot more than that.”

“No shit.” She really despised of Lawson sometimes. She did have a heart under there somewhere, but she tended to forget that everyone around her was human. “But people work better when they've got some pride.”

Jacob grunted agreement.

“We'll shelve the geth problem until tomorrow. Stow it someplace secure with at least two guards at all times. Tonight we all deserve some down-time.”

“Certainly. But Shepard—“

“Yes?” They'd stopped near the galaxy map.

“It feels wrong. The collector ships we projected didn't even show up; to the crew it was just another mission.”

Shepard stepped up onto platform near the map, emphasizing her height, and leaned back on the rail. To onlookers in the CIC she'd look like the picture of confidence.

“Nope. To the crew it was the first real step in taking the fight to the Collectors.” She took a deep breath, pulling in enough air to make her voice reach the length of the deck. “Because of what we did today, we'll be knocking on the collectors' door. It gets worse from here on out, people. A little bit worse for us.” She grinned. “A whole lot worse for them.”

She chuckled as she stepped down and resumed her quiet conversation with Miranda. “If all our priority targets go as easily as 'normal' missions, we're doing our jobs right. And if you seriously think almost getting stuck inside a crashing dead reaper is normal, you need to examine your life choices.” She slapped Miranda on the shoulder. “Hell, even I'm not that bad. And I've got a pretty skewed sense of normal.”

Miranda actually cracked a smile. “Fair point, Shepard. I'll take it under advisement.”

“Do that.” She beckoned to the yeoman. “Chambers! Call down to Gardner. See if he can't rustle
up something a bit special for dinner.” An extra measure of grog for the crew, Cap'n's orders.
“And Miranda? The party is mandatory. You deserve the down-time, too.”

The mess hall was raucous.

Joker was stiff and sore from the tense hours at the helm, his fear for Shepard and the Normandy coiled in his shoulders and down his back. He felt like he'd been the one fighting through the reaper. All that adrenaline with no outlet but his fingers on the controls. He would have preferred a quick dinner and long evening with Shepard – alone. He hadn't spared a backwards glance when the team tumbled out of the airlock; getting the Normandy safely away had taken all of his concentration. Her thump on the back of his chair was the only communication before she went aft, and by the time they were clear of Mnemosyne she was locked in conference with Jacob and Miranda.

He ducked into the med bay to grab a muscle relaxant. When he re-entered he was met with cheers – for him. He paused, uncomfortable walking with all the eyes on him. Luckily the moment of fame didn't last long, and he made his way as quickly as he could to the mess table. Safely seated and no longer scrutinized he could enjoy the appreciation for what it was. The narrow escape had captured the imaginations of the crew. Even Miranda had a compliment on his flying. Not thanks, but he didn't expect any; they'd both been doing their jobs. Competence was expected. Matthews was rather more exuberant, and Garrus interrupted his dry (and yet somehow very flattering) retelling of the mission to say “Thanks, Joker. It'd be a bit chilly now if you hadn't been there.”

Joker wondered if anyone else noticed that Shepard avoided talking about the jump at all.

She sat farther down the table, surrounded on all sides, apparently content to listen to the good humor of the crew with only a word here or there. She turned to say something to Gabby right before Garrus reached the part about the “Yawning gap between us and the ship. Just a little stroll, you know. Off a dead reaper.” She was intent on her plate when Jacob complimented Miranda on the leap, looking the other direction when Chambers tried to ask a question about what it felt like to fall between Mnemosyne's gravity and the Normandy's mass effect field.

Joker picked idly at the tray Gardner had set in front of him and frowned at her. She looked fine, but he'd seen that hesitation before she jumped, and he remembered her shaking hands late at night in the mess, quivering with the memory of open space.

“Wow.” Matthews said in his ear. “It's like, like we're actually going to do this.”

“Of course we are.” Joker had been watching Shepard instead of paying attention.

“You say it like it's obvious. But center of the galaxy, man!” Matthews shook his head in disbelief. “I s'pose you've already done enough weird shit it doesn't phase you anymore.”

“You think I do weird shit? I never even told you about the time with the two asari strippers, the meringue, and the boa constrictor.”

“Dude, if you're gonna try that trick at least pick something plausible.”

“What, you don't believe in meringue?”

“Then I'll eat his.” Donnelly stood across from them, leaning awkwardly on crutches. Joker almost told him to use his hands, not his armpits, but bit it back. He'd probably heard it ten times from
Chakwas, anyway, and it wasn't Donnelly's fault that watching him use crutches was like watching Shepard drive. Sometimes someone was just so bad at something you had an almost irresistible urge to take over, was all.

Chambers and Hadley scooted aside to make room for Donnelly, who switched from leaning on the crutches to leaning on the table, and thus laboriously to a seat. He shoved the crutches under the table (Joker leaned down and grabbed the ends to settle them before it got too awkward) and grinned at the assembled crew. “So, meringue?”

“I thought you were down to a cane,” Matthews said.

“Ah well, it seems this recovery business isn't very linear. Cane today, crutches tonight, I'll dance a hornpipe in the morning.”

Behind him Chakwas muttered “I've no doubt you will, and I'll suffer for it,” and stalked off to the other table.

Donnelly wasn't technically fit for duty by anyone's standards, but his brain still worked (“at least as well as it ever did,” Gabby had pointed out) and if he'd stayed in the medbay any longer both he and Chakwas might have lost their minds. He'd been back on light-duty for two days.

“Anyway, Matthews, if you want to reminisce about our little excursion, I have to say, 'idiots who got blown up on Omega' is a pretty sucky club.”

Joker snorted. “I'll drink to that.”

Gabby shook her head. “You were hardly an idiot, Joker. You're the only one who wasn't.”

“Hey! If I hadn't been unconscious I'd have been a grade A class one not-idiot,” Donnelly grumbled.

“Just keep telling yourself that,” Gabby said. “What about that drink?”

“We've got water, orange juice, cola, and lemon energy drink someone stole from the biotics. Hey!” Matthews sputtered as Shepard reached past Gabby and repatriated the stolen drink.

“Stick to your juice-box, Matthews. Some of us didn't sit on a chair all day.” She downed half of it in one gulp. “Lemon's one of the only good ones. Steal grape if you're going to. Yuck.”

“Agreed.” Across from Shepard Miranda made a surprisingly expressive 'ick' face. “It's an insult to grapes everywhere.” She and Shepard shared a commiserating look.

“I don't care what you're drinkin',” Donnelly said, “But I think the day deserves a toast. So – Here's to us! Going to put on our little reaper mask and Trick-or-Treat the collectors!”

There was a rattle of glasses down the table as everyone slammed their drinks back in good spacer fashion.

“Nobody here but us Reapers!” Chambers giggled.

By the time dinner was over the muscle relaxant had done its job and Joker could walk almost normally, pain muted to a dull roar. Fatigue took its place., but it was far too early – and loud – to seek his rack. Besides, he wanted some personal time with Shepard. Sitting though dinner without even a hint from her had been hard. Half the time he was thrilled, watching her interact with the crew, knowing their secret. The other half the lack of acknowledgment hurt, even though he knew
her reasoning. She hid her feelings so well.

He got up, leaned against the wall, and waited for her to walk by. “Commander,” he said quietly, “Not seeing the collector ship here means it's more likely to be waiting for us when we jump through the Omega 4.”

“Mm hmm.” She joined him, back against the bulkhead, eyes on the crew. The crowd was dispersing, heading off in small groups or lingering over coffee.

_Many times can we use collector-fighting tactics as an excuse?_ He felt like everyone in the room was staring at them, even though it clearly wasn't the case – those still at the tables were paying attention to Donnelly, who was acting out some incident from his previous alliance service, complete with voices. “I've got some new ideas about that. Can we talk?”

The corner of her mouth twitched, but she hid her smile. “Of course. Let's –“

Her invitation was interrupted by the return of Tali, who'd left the party half an hour earlier. “Shepard. I need to talk to you. About the geth.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Now. You won't believe what they've done. I tried to countermand it but –“

“Right away, Tal.” Shepard nodded to Joker. “Go on up. I'll meet you.”

It was strange to be in Shepard's quarters when she wasn't there. _It's not strange when she is? Are you really that comfortable in your CO's private space?_ He thought about it a moment and decided that yeah, he pretty much was. The only thing surprising was how quickly it had gone from awkward to comfortable. A month ago Shepard kissing him was an unrealistic and almost painful fantasy; now he was a bit miffed that he hadn't gotten some kind of 'hooray, we've once again escaped certain death' smooch. _Chill out, man. You got it good._

He took the chance to poke around her quarters in a way he wouldn't have with her watching. He passed over the data pads on the desk – he didn't want to stumble over some embarrassing personnel issue that he'd regret knowing for the rest of his life – and squeaked at the hamster cage to try to get Boochika to come out. Other than the data pads and her terminals the desk was almost bare; a few hard-copy books (one mystery, one pre-contact sci-fi novel, and a memoir) were stacked neatly in one corner. An empty picture frame rested next to them. The only other personal touch in her office was the little paper cocktail umbrella he'd given her, tucked into the model SR1.

The rest of her quarters were the same; armor in place in its locker, surfaces empty and clean. It felt unlived in. Joker wasn't much on clutter – tripping on shit he'd left on the floor would be a good way to end up in a cast and feeling like an idiot, and he tried to avoid both – and he was obsessively neat on deployment, but even by military standards her quarters felt _empty_. Spacers were used to traveling light, but even the crowded crew quarters had some signs of life; posters and trinkets decorating the racks, or one of Donnelly's awful Hawaiian shirts hanging half-out of his locker.

He wondered if she always lived like this, or if it was only so spartan because she'd been brought back with nothing except Cerberus standard-issue uniforms. Did she have a horde of beloved possessions that had been dispersed when she died? _She doesn't have family to keep her stuff._ It was a depressing thought, and he reminded himself that her death was in the past. _And we could all bite it in the next week. At least we'd bite it together._

_Shit, romance is morbid._
He pushed the gloom aside by rifling through the drawers of the bedside table. There, at last, were signs the room's occupant was very much alive – and very much Shepard. There was probably someone else in the universe who kept ration bars, spare ammo blocks, and a vibrator in their nightstand, but he was pretty sure he hadn't met them. He grinned at the last item, remembering it for later, and shut the drawer just as the door started to hiss open. He was sitting innocently on the chair when Shepard walked in.

"Damn it," she growled before she was fully through the doorway, "This is the kind of mistake that dooms all Cerberus projects. This is the kind of stupidity that keeps me awake at night thinking my arm is going to fall off or my spleen explode or something."

He'd been enjoying the absurdly domestic image of Shepard walking into her quarters complaining about work (Honey, I'm home! You wouldn't believe the office –), but the mention of internal-organ-explosion brought his attention firmly to the matter of hand.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said as she collapsed backwards onto the bed with a sigh, "I don't like the idea of things keeping you awake at night. Unless 'things' are me, obviously."

He joined her on the bed in time to see her mouth twitch up at that last bit. "Mmm," she agreed.

"So? What's the new self-destructing plan from our evil masters?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose. "After the meeting with Miranda and Jacob I told them to find somewhere safe for that geth platform while I thought it over. Someone's idea of 'safe' was the fucking AI core."

"What?!" He half rose off the bed, picturing the imminent destruction-from-within of his ship.

Rhi, eyes still closed, pulled him gently but firmly back down beside her. "It's not there now. I had them set up a containment area in the hangar, as far as possible from any access to the Normandy's systems – or EDI's. I've got Tali monitoring the defenses in case it comes back online by itself, and Garrus monitoring Tal to make sure she doesn't take the decision out of my hands."

There was a moment of silence while he tried to figure out how he was expected to respond to that.

She must have misread his quiet. "Oops. Shouldn't gush about personnel issues. At best it makes things awkward for you. Just one more reason this kind of behavior is so very frowned upon." She wrapped her arm around his waist while she said 'this kind of behavior' as if to make her meaning perfectly clear.

"Yep, telling me a quarian doesn't like the geth… massive breach of confidentiality, Shepard. I'm shocked. Or I would be, if I had the observational capacities of a rock." He shook his head. "‘Sides, after being on the same ship a few months it's less about 'professional discretion' and more ‘Hey, hey, did you see what so-and-so did with what's-his-butt? On the mess table? During first shift?!’ Everyone’s telling secrets just for entertainment. Worse than high school."

"I wouldn't know about high school," she said. "Maybe I need to start a mandatory game night, just to keep 'em occupied." They sat in companionable quiet for a moment, and then she said, "Wait. On the mess table?"

"Not really. That I know of."

"Huh. Pity there are so many people around."

It took a minute for that to sink in, and then he stared at her.
She winked at him. “Uptight, spacer boy?”

_I didn't think so._ He was pretty sure she'd been joking. Pretty sure. “What, if you're going to break regs, break 'em with a bang?”

“…on the mess hall table.” Her grin broadened.

“You realize Gardner's food has been on that table, right? Pretty sure that makes it a toxic hazard.”

“Safe to eat, but not to touch with bare skin?” She laughed. “Don't look so panicked. I was playing with you.”

“But _not_ on the mess hall table.”

“Hey, it's more fun to think about than the damn geth.” She pushed herself up to sit. “Hopefully I'll get some answers from it tomorrow.”

"From – You're not going to _activate_ it?"

"Yes, I am. Worst comes to worst, it's not like I've never killed any geth before. If it's not going well I'll just _shoot_ it."

"Ah, right, you and your constructive problem solving techniques again."

“I think outside the box.”

“After you've shot a few holes through so you can get out, sure.”

“If it ain't broke…”

“Break it?”

She snorted. “Words to live by.”

“Should I be worried right now?”

She looked mortified, and he hugged her. “Joking!”

She slouched so she could rest her head on his shoulder. “Shoulda caught on to that.”

“You've had a big day. Husks, doomed Cerberus project, husks, dead reaper, husks, leaping through space… and, um, about that – you alright?”

She stiffened. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

“What? What did I say?” Rhi –“

“It’s okay.” She shook her head sharply and grabbed his hand, threading her fingers through his unspoken reassurance. “But I can’t _think_ about it too much. That makes it worse. We got in, we got what we needed, and we got out safely. The little bump in the path doesn’t matter.”
No one but Shepard would describe a leap into free space from a crashing star ship as ‘a little bump in the path,’ but he understood what she was saying. He’d ridden the steep spiral down into depression before, endlessly turning over the same thoughts. Of course she’d want to avoid it. And maybe she’s better about not thinking of pink polar bears than I am. Just not thinking had never worked for him.

“Okay.” He squeezed her hand. “That the other reason for the party tonight?” Shit. Agree to cut the psychoanalysis crap and then leap right back into it the next time you open your mouth. Way to go.

She shrugged. “The crew deserved it. And I like seeing my people happy.”

He smiled at the possessive. “Yup. You’re such a people person.”

“Pretty sure I’m a bit too violent to be a people person, Joker.”

“You talk to people, you charm people, you intimidate people, you shoot the ever-loving-hell outta people – it’s all about people!”

"Right now I only want to think about a person, singular." She smiled almost shyly and dropped her hand to his leg, idly kneading.

He smiled back. Her kneading fingers reminded him of his sore muscles and he stretched out, legs out in front of him. Shit. She fought off a freakin' zombie army. Sitting in a chair shouldn't hurt that much. He sighed as she found a knot. Wow, that feels good.

Rhi shifted around, facing him, and her strong fingers started to work into the muscle of his calf, kneading at the sore spots – and finding spots he hadn't realized existed, pain lost in the general background ache. Before he could control it, he let out a moan. She reached further, massaging the spot just to the inside of his knee that was so prone to twisting, and –

No. This is weakness. This is private. I can't be more work than a normal person, and shit, she fought, I just sat there. I – he pushed himself up straighter and started to tug his leg away. "Shepard, you don't have to do this, I –"

She raised her eyebrows at hearing her last name. Her hands stilled, but remained on his knee. "Do what?" she asked quietly.

"Take… care of me," he got out. "I'm fine."

"Of course you are." She leaned forward and brushed a kiss across his temple, then added huskily, "But you took care of me."

He stared at her, trying to reconcile the idea that someone, anyone, let alone her, could see his body at its weakest and still be breathy with desire, see him as needing and still someone to want.

She dropped her eyes, a faint smile playing at her mouth, and her amazing hands started working again. "Tell me if I hurt you," she murmured.

Joker relaxed in wonder as she calmly continued, massaging out the aches in one leg and then the other, pushing the cuffs of his pants up so she could reach his calves skin-to-skin. Her touch released more than just muscle tension.

He didn't know if the flood of emotion was his body's reaction to the release of long-held aches, a chemical rush of endorphins; or to the fact of her, so accepting, so content with him despite
everything. He only knew it was one of the most amazing moments of his life, and if he let himself talk he'd start bawling like a baby.

He'd done a lot soul-baring for her, verbalized things he didn't usually put into words, but he couldn't explain this. He couldn't explain why it hit him so hard, or how he could feel so damn good and yet kind of want to curl up in her lap and cry. Thankfully she didn't ask, just finished what she was doing and pulled him into a hug, her long, strong legs stretched besides his weak ones. He melted into it, focusing on breathing. The tide of emotion gradually ebbed, leaving deep relaxation in its wake.

“You okay?” she asked quietly.

He breathed out carefully. “Yeah. Can't... can't talk about it.” He echoed her earlier reticence.

“Sure.” Her chest shook in a silent not-quite chuckle.

He melted further, sliding down a little to pillow his head on her chest. Her breathing was deep and even under his ear. She smelled warm and clean. His eyes kept starting to drift closed, and he didn't think he could sit up if he tried.

He smiled to himself and muttered “Breast place ever.”

Shepard's guffaw was totally worth losing the perfect peace of the moment. He laid back on the bed and watched her shake with laughter.

“Damn,” she gasped, “And here I thought we were having this sweet serious moment.”

“It was! We were!” he said. “Sweet and with juvenile puns. They go together like, like – like life and awful puns.” He waved a hand vaguely in the air. “You can't just divide these things. Everything's connected.”

“Deep. All that philosophy shit is too meta for me.”

She yawned on the last word and stretched, reaching her arms above her head and baring a few inches of perfectly toned mid-riff. It was gorgeous, smooth brown skin over lean muscle that curved into shapely hips. She was perfection, sex personified – and he was relaxed to the point where he couldn't move and was probably drooling on the pillow.

“Shit,” he said to the bedspread. “It's no fair looking like that after you made me into a puddle.”

She chuckled and cuddled up next to him, hooking a leg over his hips.

“It's no fair feeling like that, either.”

"All's fair in –" she stopped, and the maxim hung there, incomplete.

Love and war, his mind helpfully supplied. He swallowed. "So... which is this?"

Shepard looked up, to the open skylight and the stars, and enemies, beyond. Then her gaze returned to his, looking at him as if committing every detail of his face to memory, or seeking the soul behind his eyes. "Both, I think." She held the same steady gaze, but her voice dropped to a whisper.

Words caught in his throat, and he kissed her, biting playfully at her lip in defiance of the pall of seriousness that had come over them. She chuckled against his mouth and got him back, starting a breathless mock-battle that neither of them wanted to win. The leaden feeling that had followed the
massage drained away, leaving him with an altogether more enjoyable form of stiffness.

He nibbled at her lip again before pulling away to say, "Y'know, I'm feeling much less puddle-ish now."

"I noticed," she said dryly, and wiggled her hips against his. "Planning on doing something about it?"
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Joker and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good Very Bad Day.

Chapter Notes

After some insightful feedback I changed the very tail end of chapter 35; you might want to go back and read the last few paragraphs.

"Okay." Shepard strode into the hangar, carnifex held loosely in her hand. "Anyone find the 'on' button yet?"

The young Cerberus security officer came to a sloppy salute. After the reaming she'd given him for putting the geth in the AI core he'd be walking on eggshells for weeks. "No, ma'am."

"I'm more worried about the off button," Tali grumbled.

"You and me both," Jacob said.

"Off button's right here." Rhi held her pistol out briefly. "But I want answers from this thing." They formed a loose circle around the dormant geth. "Like how it can talk, and why it's wearing – if wearing is the right word – a piece of N7 armor."

"Perhaps 'incorporated into its external structure' would be more accurate, but 'wearing' is quicker." Tali shrugged. "Sorry. I really have been trying to figure out how to turn it on! There's physical damage to some of its systems from the husks, but nothing that should prevent it from activating. I soldered the head cable conduit where it had loosened. I don't know what else to do!"

"Have you tried unplugging everything and plugging it back in again?"

Tali glared at her. "Shepard."

The corner of Rhi's mouth twitched up. "Just a thought." She nudged the geth with her booted toe. "Tech's not my forte. That's why I have people for this part."

When her toe connected with the geth's head the second time, there was a click, a whir, and the front-mounted light came on.

She had her pistol up and aimed in a heartbeat. "See? You just had to thump it."

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Joker laughed aloud when the geth activated. It wasn't just that everyone but Shepard – Tali, Jacob, even Miranda – had jumped about a foot backwards in surprise. It was the looks they were giving each other. Looks that said "I won't tell anyone you spooked if you won't tell anyone I did" across
language and species barriers. Shepard hadn't noticed; all her attention was on the geth.

He cut the clip from the hangar footage and sent it to her omnitool. Anything that good had to be shared.

"I could have mined the geth system for intel without risking reactivation if I had been allowed a hard-wire connection," EDI pointed out.

"What's that you said? You could have been mind-wiped by a geth and given over control of the Normandy? Good point, EDI."

"You are being sarcastic."

"You're learning! I'm so proud of you."

"I am. And I look forward to many enlightening conversations with our newest team member – whose name, by the way, is Legion."

"New who what now?" He turned back to the screen. Shepard was talking with the geth, gun apparently forgotten by her side. The geth was animated, gesturing and tilting its strange head in a mimicry of organic habits.

He slumped back in his seat. "Holy shit. Now we're friends with the geth. Love and bunnies and robots. I hope she knows what she's doing."

"You do not seem intrigued by this discovery, Mr. Moreau. This is the first recorded instance of a human being speaking to geth."

"Bullshit. Shepard's spoken to lots of geth. She usually uses four letter words."

"It is the first instance of speaking with the geth. They are effectively a new synthetic species, for all that is known about them. The news that they have factions is entirely unpredicted. What this means for synthetic/organic relations is… vast."

Joker yawned and patted her console. "Look, I don't mean to seem bored with your new robot friend. It's great that you can two can talk subroutines or whatever. I'm just kinda tired."

It had been hard to drag himself from Shepard's bed last night, and harder still to fall asleep in his own. It seemed like such a waste, knowing she was only two decks above him. He went back to his work for awhile, but the mind-numbing reports didn't help him stay awake.

He yawned again, loudly.

"Oh, don't start," Rolston yelled from his station. "D'you know how many hours of the shift we have left?"

"Don't mind him," chimed in Hadley. "Fly-boy over there was out la-ate last night."

Shit! Joker scrambled for an excuse. How many late nights had it been in a row, now? Not counting the one night he'd stayed. Someone was bound to catch on sooner or later.

"What," said Matthews, "You think he was meeting a girl behind the bleachers like in high-school? Don't be ridiculous."

"Hey!" Joker's ego jumped in front of his brain. "Why couldn't I be? Aside from the lack of bleachers, obviously."
"Because all the women were on duty or asleep."

Joker grimaced. Shit, but Matthews could be weird. "You checked?"

He turned his chair around in time to see Hotchkins, who had been walking down the companionway, fetch Matthews' a rap on the head with her data pad.

"That's for being creepy," she said.

Joker laughed.

"I look out for people, and all I get is abuse? I should report that," Matthews grumbled.

"Yeah, you do that," Joker said. "See how far it gets you with Shepard."

"Yeah, maybe she'll give me a medal," Hotchkins agreed. "I'm certainly not going to win anything for launching probes. Hey, Joker – datapad's for you."

"What? Oh, thanks." He skimmed through it; notes on the geth – *Legion*, he reminded himself, *we're giving them* names now – interrogation. Judging by the number of typos and lack of organization, Shepard had been jotting down her thoughts whenever they occurred to her. The window into her thought process was surprisingly charming. She wanted to consult with him.

"So, what were you up to last night, Joker?"

Joker looked up, irritation replacing his smile. *Try the truth.* "I was with Shepard."

"Aw, man, she had you crunching tactics shit again? I know you're a workaholic, but everyone needs a break."

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Tell 'em the truth and it flew right by. What would he have to do, kiss her on the bridge in front of everyone? Would they believe it then? *Shit, I don't care what they think.* Still, he'd like to see their faces if he did. A long, deep kiss that no one could mistake for anything but what it was, dispelling the little nagging voice that said it was shame, not propriety, which kept her so discreet. *Stop it. You know it's not.*

He squirmed, uncomfortable. "If a few late nights is all it takes to keep us flying? I am not going to complain. Anyway, I get to avoid Rolston's snores. I keep trying to delay the inevitable."

Rolston's 'I'm sorry! I can't help it!' was interrupted by Shepard on the radio. Joker spun back forward to give her his full attention. "Commander?"

"Did you get a chance to look at that data pad?"

He glanced down again to make sure he hadn't missed anything. "Geth schism, our good geth wants to kill the bad geth, and, oh, you noted something from Tali about engine manifold calibrations – was that supposed to be part of it?"

"Oops." He heard a beep; she must have transferred the mistplaced note to her 'tool. "Yeah, that's about it. Chance to hit the geth – the 'heretic' geth, that is, hell, even the robots have religious wars now – where it hurts."

"Does that mean they're Grown Up Life? I’m pretty sure 'have deadly religious schism' is one of the final qualifications."

"Don't ask me. They should've sent a philosopher. So, whatcha think?"
He snorted. "Chance to see the inside of a geth station and kill thousands of the things that made our lives hell back in the day? Doesn't matter what I think; I know we're going."

"See, that's insightful. I should consult you more often. Plot a course, Joker."

"Did it five minutes ago, Commander."

The geth station was both stranger and more familiar than Shepard had expected. It was startlingly disturbing to walk among all that whirring machinery without a console or read-out in sight, but at least they could walk. She'd half expected to learn that the geth stored their mobile platforms on the outside and moved their electronic selves around over wires or something. Finding something as prosaic as a hallway – even a hallway with such low gravity – was a relief.

The fact that the dormant geth platforms powered up and started attacking them whenever she put a foot wrong was less relaxing, but she'd fought geth before. They went down just like anything else. They flew really well in the low gravity, too, once she gave them a little biotic help.

Legion's little moral dilemma was more of a challenge. *Rewrite the geth, or erase them.*

The thought of all the intel they could have brought back on the reapers wasn't enough balanced against the threat of them turning again, or spreading their virus. Legion was too new a factor to trust completely, even if he – it – they? – had saved her life. Besides, the thought of 'rewriting' anyone, whether they were exactly living or not, made her stomach turn. *Better a clean death than brainwashing.*

She was much more comfortable with explosions.

They made it out of the collapsing station with a full minute to spare; the violent collapse Legion had unleashed a roar behind them. Joker grinned at her when she stopped by the bridge and made a crack about the daily-recommended value of running-from-explosions.

"Don't be silly. If it was daily I'd have to blow up parts of the Normandy. Weekly, at most."

"Someone needs to put you on a diet. Pretty sure explosions are a sometimes-food."

"That one didn't even make any sense, Joker."

"I'll explain it to you. Later." He winked. "Got a ship to fly, y'know."

"So, uh… how long do you think this cloak-and-dagger thing is going to work?" Joker rattled his fingers on the edge of the couch. He'd been trying to think of a better way to put it without luck.

"What?" Rhi lifted her head from his shoulder and looked at him in confusion.

*I should've waited,* he thought. She was worn out from her fight through the heretic station, whether she'd admit it or not. The impressive amount of food she'd consumed since was a testimony to how much she'd pulled on her biotics. It also was making her a bit slow. No backing out now, though.

"Y'know, *this.*" He curled his fingers in hers for emphasis. "I mean, not *this* this, just the keeping-secrets part. It's a small ship. Hadley was wondering where I was last night."
She sat up. "Shit."

It hurt, a little. Stop it. She has valid reasons – morale and professionalism and all that command stuff you ignore. You're just tired. "S'alright. They all just assume you're working my ass off."

"I was working your ass off." She chuckled and settled back into his shoulder.

He couldn't help but grin at that. Practice might not make perfect, but it made damn good – and they were getting practice whenever they could. He wrapped his arm around her and murmured into her hair, "Someday, I want to kiss you in the CIC, in front of who cares who. I want you to kiss me."

He thought she stiffened a little, in his arms, but before he could ask why the radio crackled to life.

Shepard sat bolt upright, all traces of her lethargy gone.

"Commander!" Mercer's voice was intense, but not panicked. She'd come a long way. "We just intercepted a report from Verde Tau. Their comm-buoys started going down an hour ago – the last transmission was a visual. A collector ship."

He exchanged a loaded look with Rhi. Another colony vanishing on their watch.

"Shit." She breathed it out softly enough that Mercer probably couldn't hear. "How far away is this place, Mercer?"

"One quick jump, commander. We could be there in a matter of hours – but EDI is still busy installing the IFF."

They were lurking in an uninhabited system give themselves breathing space for the IFF install. Joker had spent hours with EDI making sure the strange device was working with his systems, but the intricacies of the reaper IFF were beyond him. Identify Friend/Foe units were usually nothing more than a coded beacon – this one was something else.

"Heard and understood, Mercer. EDI! Abort the IFF integration. We need to move."

The pause before EDI responded made his heart sink. It was brief – only a moment, just time to watch Rhi's chest rise and fall with her breath, to see her face go still as the mask fell into place – but for EDI, it was an eternity. He knew something was wrong just by the delay.

"Shepard, the integration process is proving surprisingly complex. It is not possible to 'pause.' At this point, I estimate reverting to the Normandy's previous defaults will take approximately six point three hours."

"So work while we go."

"I cannot guarantee we will be able to use a Mass Relay safely. The ship is in effect part way between registering as a reaper and its previous human civilian designation. The result is… unpredictable."

"My ship has an identity crisis?" Joker said.

"Worst case?" Shepard asked.

"The Normandy could be reduced to particulate matter. In the second worst case, sheer forces caused by non-uniform registration could tear the ship apart." EDI paused. "Or the relay/ship
interface could function within normal, crew-safe parameters. It is very difficult to determine."

"Six hours before we can jump, got it." Shepard was on her feet, heading for the armor locker. "We'll take the shuttle."

"The shuttle?!" Joker pulled himself up, suddenly scared. "Shit, that's like leaving your gun at home! That thing's not even armed – how're you going to face down the collectors without some air support?"

"We managed it on Horizon." She'd stripped down to underwear and a sports bra, her uniform forgotten in a pile by her feet.

"When they were already packed up and halfway out the door, yeah! What if you interrupt the middle of the party?"

She shoved one foot and then the other into the thick full-body under-armor and yanked it up. He was too worried to appreciate the little wiggle she did to get it over her hips. "We'll take the whole team. That's more than I had on Horizon. If it's not enough to stop the collectors it should still be enough to get us out again."

"Okay." This was what they were here for, after all. Protecting the colonies. He turned towards the door as she got her hands through the sleeves and started zipping up the front. "I'll go warm up the kodiak."

"No." She stopped with a piece of ceramic armor in her hand. "Miranda will pilot." She smiled a little to take the sting out of it. "I need you here."

"With a ship I can't fly? What good can that possibly do? If you're going to charge the collectors with that cow of a shuttle, you're going to need the best!" He'd never worried before when Shepard went into battle. Because we always fought together. Her on the ground, him in the sky.

She reached him in two long strides, straight posture and armored boots making the most of their height difference. "That was an order, helmsman." Her voice softened, but her stare didn't. "What I'm going to need is the one person I totally trust in command of the Normandy."

He deflated, closing his eyes against her gaze. "Aye aye, ma'am."

"Joker –"

He realized how sullen that had sounded and mentally kicked himself. Shit. "No, I get it. It's... just a bad situation."

"Yeah." She sighed. "With people-eating machines out there we can't expect too many good ones."

He slipped his arms around her waist for a breath, the weird slick weave of the under-armor unpleasant against his skin, then left for the helm.

The awkwardness still hung in the air, frustration and hurt and no time to examine any of it.

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Joker watched the shuttle leave from the bridge via vid-feed. He couldn't fault Miranda on her take off, though he watched like a hawk for any little wobble. Her skill shouldn't have been irritating, but it was.
He'd felt an unexpected surge of pride when Shepard announced his temporary command. Silly, since it would have been de facto anyway, but still. The crew had seemed impressed, showing him unusual respect – for the first hour. Then it started to sink in that they were stuck in dead space with nothing they could do to help, and the grumbling started.

"Some command, eh, Joker?" Matthews called. "All hands, head for the Citadel! Oh, wait, we can't. Return to Earth – oops, can't do that either. Quick, head for –"

"Shut. Up." Joker looked back over his shoulder to see Matthews with his feet up on the console. His ankles were sticking through the holographic interface.

He thought of the quiet voice Rhi sometimes used, the one with hints of both humor and menace. "I could still order you to spit-polish the console you've got your boots on, Mr. Navigator."

It didn't come out quite right, but Matthews put his feet back on the deck fast enough.

Hadley chuckled. "Thanks." He cocked an eyebrow at Matthews. "Haven't you figured out 'hurry up and wait' yet?"

Joker abandoned his useless screens and turned his chair around, stretching his stiff legs. "'Course he hasn't. That's a military specialty." He grinned at Matthews. "Private sector doesn't have the skills."

Matthews stuck out his tongue.

Joker turned back, idly scrolling through a read-out. Rhi must be past the relay by now, halfway to the colony. How could she possibly stop an attack with twelve people? With the comm-buoys down, how long would it be before he knew if they'd succeeded… or failed? His stomach twisted. What if something happened and he didn't know? What if she didn't come back, and that awkward, half-sullen hug had been the last one? He wished he hadn't questioned her. He wished she hadn't pulled rank.

He wished he'd gone with them.

EDI interrupted his miserable thoughts. "Mr. Moreau, I have discovered concerning anomalies in our energy signature."

She illustrated her findings on his console, data scrolling past almost faster than he could follow. He reached out and stopped it, reversing to check the numbers. Could they be sending something besides their normal heat out there? He didn't want to believe it. "It's just radiation. White noise."

"I have detected a signal embedded in the static. We are transmitting the Normandy's location."

She had his full attention. "Transmitting? To who? Are we broadcasting or is it a tight beam? How long have –"

A collector ship appeared in front of them, dropping out of FTL bare meters from their position.

His mouth dropped open.

"Oh. Shit," he whispered.

A tiny, treacherous part of him was awed at any being that could pilot a ship through FTL and
emerge meters, rather than kilometers, from their target. That took skill – and guts. Or maybe a death wish.

He didn't let his respect slow him down, though. His fingers flew over the screen, focused, blocking out the gasps and shouts of surprise from behind him.

"Getting out of here!" The collector ship was right on top of them, but if he dropped her straight down her z-axis they could get enough clearance to make it FTL. He'd take his chances with 'unpredictable results' – the results of sticking around were far too predictable.

The screens flashed red under his fingers. "EDI, what the –"

"The propulsion systems have been disabled. I am detecting a virus in the ship's computers."

"From the IFF?!" They'd spent days analyzing the thing and they hadn't found that? Had EDI just missed it, or had she ignored it?

No time to wonder. The collector vessel filled the entire view-screen, impossible to ignore. They haven't blasted us in two yet. They want to board. He toggled the ship-wide comm, fighting to keep his voice even while his gut flipped in terror. "All-hands. Prepare to be boarded by a hostile force. Arm and take emergency positions."

He didn't have to tell them where. Shepard had drilled them in that, just like everything else.

Behind him boots pounded as the CIC crew jumped to his command. He grabbed the heavy pistol strapped to his chair, the one Shepard had suggested. Ever since the explosion on Omega he'd felt more comfortable with a gun to hand, but he'd never expected to use one on his own ship. He loaded the heat-sink with numb fingers and tried not to think about how many shots it took to take down a collector.

He almost wished he hadn't spent so much time watching Shepard's feed. Ignorance was bliss.

EDI's voice interrupted his frantic thoughts. "Primary defense systems are offline. We can save the Normandy, Mr. Moreau, but you must help me."

Can't just save the Normandy. Have to save the people. He'd learned that last time, when he watched Rhi die. But Rhi isn't here now. He felt an irrational surge of anger. She should be here.

She knew better than to leave her crew undefended, she knew how to fight, she'd know what to do.

His fingers moved over the controls, trying the propulsion systems again even though he knew they were useless.

"You have to give me the ship, Mr. Moreau."

"Give you the – you're crazy!" Did EDI want to help, or kill them all? Had she known about the virus?

"There are no other viable options. If I can access the Normandy's systems I can remove the virus. Without that access I am useless."

"Why?!" he shouted, "Why do you care?"

"I am tasked with protecting ship, crew, and mission." EDI paused and added, "And I do not want them to destroy my… home."
"Me neither," he muttered, and hauled himself out of his chair, "but if you start singing 'Daisy Belle,' I'm done."

"You must reach the AI core undetected. Collectors have breached starboard cargo. Use the maintenance shaft in the science lab. The lights in the corridor will guide –"

"I know my own ship; I don't need to follow the god damn bouncing ball!"

The CIC was almost deserted, only four crewmen guarding the elevator. As he came abreast of them he thought about taking their place. Someone healthier, someone quicker, should do this – he could stand still and fire a gun.

Before he could say anything the elevator door opened with a scream of tortured metal and someone – Matthews – shouted a warning.

No time to trade, now. He was closest to the lab. Joker lunged for the door as the first claw came through the door. Hadley was yelling, telling him to hurry, voice barely carrying over the rattle of gunfire.

The door closed. On the other side someone screamed, a sound so twisted by pain that he couldn't even tell which of his crewmates it was. He wanted to run, but he'd never run in his life. He didn't even know how. Even augmented his bones couldn't take the jarring. Instead he sped his stride. The scream turned his stomach in knots, made him want to go back and help, or hide, or something. He lurched into the lab bench, fear and haste making him unsteady. "Shit!" You can't help anyone if you fall.

Down into the dark maintenance shaft, ladder cool beneath his fingers. There he could breathe a little easier; his arms shared the work with his overburdened legs, and he didn't have to worry that a collector was sneaking up behind him, noise covered by his own loud progress, mouth or proboscis or whatever ready to –

I should never have watched all those horror movies. "Shit. Shit shit shit."

"Multiple hostiles detected on the crew deck!" EDI's warning came just as he reached life support. Hawthorne was waiting – EDI must have briefed him. Why didn't she send him to the core? Damn it, EDI!

Hawthorne leveled his rifle, spouted something about protecting him, and charged out the door. Shit!

Joker followed, fingers sweaty on the grip of the pistol. Just have to make it to the med bay.

The hall between crew quarters and the observation lounge was a mess, screaming, shooting, and strange alien noises combining into a wall of sound. Some part of his brain kept expecting to hear Shepard’s voice raised above the din, taking charge, saving them all – but all he heard was chaos. He pressed his back to the wall and stuck close to Hawthorne.

Hawthorne stopped at the intersection, firing. In front of them a nightmare of conjoined once-human husks, back bulging with unthinkable fluid, was pulling at a body in Cerberus fatigues. The monster squealed at the interruption and raised its arm. Images from Shepard's mission vid flashed before Joker's eyes: footage shaken by waves of force, the thud of her armor hitting the ground after she'd been flung off her feet. If that thing unleashed its biotics neither of them would survive.

Luckily that wasn't the only thing he'd learned watching all those missions.
He fired over Hawthorne's shoulder, once, twice, three times, straight into the bulging fluid membrane on the thing's back. The sack ruptured, viscous fluid and lumps of flesh spilling out over the thing's body, covering the floor, and Hawthorne, in vile gunk. The monster staggered and started to go down.

*She never mentioned the smell.*

"I've got it, keep going!"

Joker didn't hang around to see Hawthorne pick a new target. The med bay was only a few steps away, and he had a clear path. Most of the fight was by the elevator, collectors and husks mauling the crew in the confined space. Someone started screaming as they were dragged away, the sound of pure terror filling the deck.

He almost turned back when he realized it was Mercer.

"No." He kept going, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. *Come on, Jeff, almost there.*

The med bay door closed behind him, but there were more creatures moving beyond the glass. He ducked bellow the window level, but his thighs weren't strong enough to move in a crouch. He crawled the rest of the way to the AI core, panting, sure that at any moment the glass above him would shatter and he would be hauled to his doom.

The AI core doors closed him into eerie silence.

He pulled himself up, shaky on aching knees, and looked around the core for a large red button labeled ‘DO NOT PUSH.’ There wasn't one. "Alright, EDI, I'm at, uh… you."

"Connect the core to the *Normandy*’s primary control module."

It turned out it was a big red cable, not a button. The coil was covered in warning tape and secured with plastic security ties that had to be cut before it would reach to the port EDI had indicated.

Stepping back into the med-bay for a scalpel was the scariest thing he'd ever done. *Why don't I have a knife? Rhi always has a knife.* He wished she and her knife were here.

He muttered to himself as he sawed off the security tape. "This is where it starts. When we're all organic batteries they'll know who to blame. 'This is all Joker's fault, what a tool he was. I have to spend all day computing pi because he plugged in the overlord'."

The last tape snapped, and he pulled the cable over to the core's console. *Here goes nothing.*

The lights winked out.

*Well, shit.*

They came back on again with a flicker. "Thank you, Mr. Moreau. You will need to reach engineering to manually reactivate the main drives –"

"Ugh, you want me to go crawling through the ducts again."

"I enjoy the sight of humans on their knees."

He stared at her hologram. *Not just crazy. Textbook crazy. And your fault.*

"That was a joke."
“Right.” He turned for the maintenance shaft leading down towards engineering. “Remind me to talk to you about how there’s a time and a place for your kind of ‘humor’. If I survive.” He strained to hear the sounds of conflict outside, to get some idea of what the hell was going on, but the layered shielding around the AI core was too thick.

The shaft let him out in Jack's pit. He'd never been all the way down there before; there was no reason to see it, and, with Jack in residence, a lot of reason to avoid it. Dim red emergency lighting made it even grimmer.

Two staircases lead up to engineering; either one could lead to collectors. "Port or Starboard?"

"I thought you did not need to 'Follow the bouncing ball.'"

"Damn it, port or Sta--"

A line of lights flickered to life in the floor, and he started to climb.

A shadow overhead warned him in time to duck back down the stairs, crouching around the corner while the silhouette of the collector passed above. They were carrying body pods. Each would have someone trapped inside. Ken? Gabby? Don't think about it.

EDI whispered an all-clear and he started moving again. Engineering was empty.

"Activate the drive and I will open the airlocks as we accelerate. All hostiles will be killed."

"What? What about the crew?!!" She had known about the virus, she wanted the ship for herself, she–

"They are gone, Jeff. The collectors took them." The softness in her voice was as surprising as her use of his first name.

"Shit." He didn't feel anything but tired. It was too much to grasp. Part of him was still expecting Shepard and her team to return, to miraculously pull triumph from disaster at the last possible moment. This couldn't be happening.

He started the drive activation sequence, thankful that it wasn't so different from the systems that managed shuttles like the kodiak. The core started to glow again, the massive sphere lighting the darkness of engineering. Around him, the *Normandy* hummed to life.

"I have control."

The surge as EDI flung the Normandy into motion threw him to the floor.

—

Joker moaned.

He hurt everywhere; head, bones, and heart. *And butt.* At least he'd landed on a part that was padded. He started to roll to one side and a rib joined the cacophony of shouting body-parts. *Great.*

The headache didn't hit until he was upright. He took off his hat and ran a hand over his head, feeling for swelling. There was a small lump on the back of his skull. *Concussion? Have to ask Chakwas.*

Chakwas was gone.
Everyone was gone.

*Everybody's dead, Dave.* A stupid line from a stupid old TV show. That had been the computer talking too, hadn't it? A messed-up computer talking to the only human left alive. He started to shake. They were gone. Shepard was gone. He'd failed and he was alone. *Everybody's dead. Everybody's dead, Dave.*

"Who is 'Dave'?” EDI asked.

He hadn't realized he'd said it out loud. *Get a grip, man.* He took two deep, steadying breaths. "Not important," he said, "What –" No. "Nevermind." He didn't need EDI to tell him what to do. He clutched his aching head.

*I have to call Shepard.* He'd have to explain the inexcusable, have to hear her voice. He'd have to tell it to the whole crowded shuttle, full of warriors who'd left to save a planet when he couldn't even manage one ship. *She should have been here all along. If she'd stayed this wouldn't have happened.*

His head pounded when he stood up. His stomach roiled on the point of nausea. *Side effect of concussion. Right.*

Rhi's parting words echoed in his mind – *The ship's all yours. Take care of her.* He'd thought it was a silly thing to say at the time – it's what he always did, what he did even when it was stupid, what he'd done even when it meant she died. Now it was bitter. He'd saved the ship – but only the ship, and only by unleashing EDI. *EDI saved the ship, really.* He'd just hid.

Collectors carrying frozen crew-mates marched through his memory to a soundtrack of Mercer's screams.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't face her. *She left me with her crew, with her ship – with our ship. And the ship's all I have left.* He closed his eyes. *I can't do it.*

"Send a message to Shepard's shuttle." He mumbled it, ashamed to be avoiding the task, unable to face it. "Tell her what happened."

"Message away." EDI must have drafted it while he was still lying on the floor moaning. "Are you feeling well, Jeff?"

"No. But thanks for asking."

He hobbled stiffly away. Maybe he could get to the med-bay before he puked.
Shepard waited at the shuttle hatch as they approached the *Normandy*, breathing in a slow careful rhythm to counter the racing of her heart. The threat had come and won. There was nothing to fight here – but her body didn't know that.

Only she and Miranda, alone in the shuttle's cockpit, had heard EDI's call. They'd shared a moment of stunned silence, but they didn't look at each other until they had their game-faces safely back on. Shepard had quietly ordered Miranda to reverse course and returned to the main compartment to inform the rest of the team, her voice cool and clinical. They'd erupted with a predictable range of intense – and loud – emotions; anger, grief, and frustration magnified by the tight quarters of the Kodiak.

She gave them fifteen minutes to vent before she put an end to it. Fifteen minutes was all she could take.

Her face was still as a mask. Still as her armor. Faster-than-light travel had never seemed so slow. Screaming with her team-mates or urging Miranda to somehow push the Kodiak faster would be equally useless. As useless as wondering why it had been EDI who called. The AI swore Joker was alright, but if that was true, why hadn't he been the one to tell her what happened? Surely he'd know it was his responsibility… and how much hearing his voice would mean to her.

A parade of nagging possibilities tromped through her mind. EDI had lied, believing that Shepard wouldn't come back, or would do something rash, if he wasn't there. EDI had lied, because she'd finally turned a sociopathic killer like all the vids warned about and was luring them all to their deaths. Jeff was unconscious, or a prisoner of the collectors, or his own ship, or –

She gritted her teeth and chased the demons away. She'd had a buddy once who claimed visualization was the key to meditation, so she visualized charging into the middle of her fears and leveling them with a shotgun.

It helped.

Her exhaled breath expelled their corpses, and she breathed deeply into the clear space that was left.

Get back to the *Normandy*.

Find Joker.

That was all that mattered. Everything else could wait.

Get back to the *Normandy*.

Find Joker.

She'd held it in her mind like a mantra during the whole trip back. Anything else was only a distraction. Losing focus would only let her crew down more than she already had. Behind her the team was silent, though whether they were relaxed by her calm or smothered by it, she didn't know.
Finally, finally, the Normandy was visible, hangar bay opened wide to accept them back. Her boots hit the hangar floor before the shuttle was fully settled in its cradle. "EDI, where's Jeff?"

"In the conference room, Shepard."

The quiet of the ship reproached her. Everyone was gone. Hadley, Hotchkins, Patel. Shit, Mercer was practically a baby. Donnelly, Gabby, Matthews – they were flight crew, supposed to stay safe and sound, and she'd already let them get hurt once already. Gardner, Rolston, Chakwas. Chakwas. Months of quiet companionship, brandy and cribbage games late at night in the med-bay. Her crew. Her people.

The access ladders clanked under her armored hands, climbing faster than the damn elevator could manage. She would worry about them after she saw Jeff.

The briefing room doors slid open.

He was sitting on the table, and he didn't even look up at the sound of the door. Misery showed in the slump of shoulders, the way he hid his face in his hands.

She wanted nothing more than to touch him, talk to him, and reassure herself that he was okay, but Miranda was on her heels, and no sooner had she entered than she started taking out her own frustrations.

She pushed past Rhi to loom over Joker. "Everyone? You lost everyone, and damn near lost the ship!"

Miranda's outburst provided a clear, if unfortunate, outlet for Shepard's roiling emotions. Her thunderous “Stand down!” drowned out Joker’s bitter “I know, alright? I was here!’’ The shout was louder than she’d intended.

Miranda took a step back, flustered, and Rhi interposed herself between them.

"Jeff did every damn thing he could, and a hell of a lot more than you could've expected him to. No one left on the ship was trained for that kind of combat." Because I took everyone trained for it with me. Damn it. "EDI said you hit your head." She gestured to Miranda, who stepped forward to scan him with her omni-tool. He started to jerk away before he realized what she was doing and Miranda growled 'Stop moving, damn it.'

Shepard shot her a quelling glance. "It was a rough ride. How are you holding up?"

Miranda stepped back, indicating with a gesture that she hadn't seen anything seriously amiss.

Joker looked at his hands, refusing to meet her eyes. "There are a lot of empty chairs around here."

"We did everything we could, Jeff."

"Yeah. Thanks, mom,’’ he muttered.

EDI’s reassurance reminded Miranda of her other grievance. "Don't even get me started about unshackling that damned AI."

"What was I supposed to do, break my arm at them?"

"You are too critical of your own abilities, Jeff. The collectors attacked in numbers the crew could not hope to fight, but they made an attempt. I can project the footage of Mr. Moreau killing a scion
if you doubt my word."

He waved away her suggestion. "There're enough collector corpses around, EDI. They know we tried. They know I failed." He scowled at Miranda. "Anyway, EDI cleared the ship. She's alright."

"I assure you; I am still bound by protocols in my programming. Even if I were not, you are my crewmates."

EDI's words were more reassuring than Shepard could explain. It was nice to be reminded that not all of her assumptions lead to disaster. _EDI's just like anyone else. Treat her like crew, and she does her best to live up to the role._ Anyway, if she'd wanted to EDI could have opened the airlocks again after Joker was in an unsealed space, and flown off with her own ship.

"EDI's had plenty of opportunity to kill us. We need all the help we can get." She took a deep breath. "We're going after them."

"We don't even have a crew!"

"With my new access to the Normandy's systems, I can perform most functions of the missing crew members concurrently with my other processes."

Miranda glared at EDI’s projection. Shepard ignored it. "How long until we can reach the Omega 4?"

"The IFF's purged and functional," Joker said, "We can leave whenever you’re ready. I give us three hours to hit the relay to the Omega system, then another two to the Omega-4."

"Good. Get on it. Jacob, there're collector carcasses on my crew deck – deal with that. Everyone else, make sure the collectors didn't leave any surprises for us. Tali's on engines; Garrus, weapons. I want the ship cleared before we reach the system, then see to your own prep." She took a deep breath. "We're going after my crew."

The team dispersed, and Shepard took five minutes to peel out of her armor before going to look for Joker in the cockpit. The rest of the squad was busy with their assigned tasks; she and Jeff would have a moment to themselves, and she could – she wasn't sure what, actually. There was no way to make this better. But she could do something.

She was prepared for guilt, for grief, for pain. She wasn't prepared for anger.

"What the hell were you doing, leaving us out here where collectors can work us over?" He was shaking, eyes bright with emotion, a far cry from the defeated tone he'd had in the briefing. That had been about work. This was aimed at her. "You took everyone who could've made a damn bit of difference and left us, left me. Y’know what? I should just go. Next port just get the hell out of here."

She rocked back as if she'd been slapped. The deck seemed to shift beneath her feet, the most stable part of her unstable world collapsing, falling to pieces, leaving a hole where her heart should have been. _How could he say that?_ She backed up without noticing, physically distancing herself from the hurt and betrayal written on his face. The platitudes and reassurances she'd planned were a lump in her throat. She could only stare at him, trying to see the person who kissed her and shared jokes, who'd been there when she woke up.

She'd gotten used to his warmth, but now what she felt was as sharp and cold as broken glass.

He stared back at her, chest shuddering with his ragged breath, jaw clenched.
EDI broke the tableau, her voice soft in a way Shepard had never heard before. "You don't mean that, Jeff."

He drew a deep, quavering breath. "I – No. Shit, no, I didn't. Don't – " He stood up and took an unsteady step towards her. "I'm sorry, commander. Rhi. Please don't think I meant it. I just – it felt good to say. I needed to let it out, something out, I – shit, Shepard." His voice broke. "I don't want to have fucked this up, too."

Understanding poured in, bringing with it a flood of emotion almost too intense to bear, filling the hollow void his outburst had left. He was pushed too far. He needed an outlet, of course he did, fuck, he had to watch friends get taken away in front of him and then be on the ship alone, waiting. He’s tired and hurt and scared shitless, and it's my fault. Fuck, she'd been selfish.

She looked at the floor, unable to look at his face. "You're right." She swallowed and shut her eyes. "Answering that distress call – leaving the crew, leaving you, alone – it was the worst mistake I've ever made."

She heard his footsteps come closer, felt his hand on hers, tentative.

"The worst mistake I ever made..." he lifted her hand to his heart, and finished in a whisper, "You died."

She wanted to argue, but she couldn't deny his guilt in the face of her own. Instead she stepped closer. His arms went around her immediately, and they held each other in silence.

"When EDI told us I was so damn worried about you," she whispered into his neck. "I didn't know whether I could believe her – I thought if you were really all right, you would have called." Now, with him safe in her arms, she could face how terrified she'd been in a way she couldn't in the moment.

"I couldn't do it," he whispered back. "I... I just couldn't. To tell you I'd failed you, failed everyone like that."

He shivered and she held him closer, arms strong on his back. "You didn't fail everyone, and you didn't fail me. We'll get them back, Jeff." She took a deep breath, hoping it might steady them both. "We have a ship. Chasing Saren or collectors – the Normandy's all we've ever needed."

He snorted quietly. "Funny. Seems to me we also needed guns, biotics, and a metric shit-load of high powered explosive. Oh, and a mako."

"Okay," she said, "But we still have that stuff, too. Except the mako." She grinned. "I'll make do without it. Somehow. Add more explosives, maybe."

"Hmmph."

"EDI, you said you could replicate the functions of the crew – can you mind the helm for a bit?"

Joker tensed in her arms. Don't be ridiculous. I'm not replacing you. I'm taking care of you.

"Of course, Shepard. Though the Normandy will perform better with Jeff at the helm when more complex maneuvers are required. My processing abilities far surpass those of an organic, but I cannot replicate intuition."

Joker didn't rise to defend organic processing capacities. He must be absolutely exhausted. She pulled away from him, worry creasing her brow. "We have a few hours before we hit the relay to
Omega. Get some sleep."

He shook his head. "No."

"Jeff." She raised a hand to his shoulder. "You need it, and we need you rested for this. We're already on course, and I'll wake you before the relay. EDI will be fine."

He shook his head again. "No. It's..." his voice dropped to a whisper, "It's too damn quiet."

Oh. Why hadn't she thought of that? The crew deck was eerie enough, the absence of chatter a constant reminder of the people who were gone. The bunkroom would be worse.

She slipped her hand through his and tugged him gently through the empty CIC to the elevator. He followed without protest, collapsing against her after she pushed the button for her quarters. She leaned against the wall and held him close for the short ride, grounding them both.

Once in the room he started to argue, weakly. "I'm fine, Shepard."

She pointed sternly at the bed.

The corner of his mouth twitched. Not a smile, but at least a start. "Are you putting me to bed?"

"Yup."

"Somehow that's not as sexy as I imagined."

"There'll be time for that later."

"Will there?" He didn't sound scared; just resigned. It was an awful sound; a voice with no fight left in it.

"Yes." She shoved him gently towards the bed. "Plenty of time. Time with no emergencies. Time when neither of us is freshly injured. Time with utter relaxation."

"Time with room service?"

"Yes. Sure. Absolutely." She pulled off her boots. Joker winced when he bent to undo his. "Rib?"

He nodded and bent over again, gritting his teeth.

"Here." She knelt on the deck matting and slipped them off. He looked like he'd have objected if he wasn't so beat.

She waited for him to settle himself before she joined him, curling up against his back. When his breathing was slow and even with sleep she slipped out of bed. She'd dozed on the shuttle, and there were preparations to make.

Miranda had said the concussion was nothing to worry about, but Rhi worried, anyway. It was hard to tell in the dim blue light from the fish tank, but he looked too pale. He'd be better after he'd rested. He had to be. **He'll be better when he sees the crew safe. It's not just a broken rib and a bump on the head that he's dealing with.**

Still. She picked up her boots and padded to the office alcove so she wouldn't disturb him. "EDI," she whispered. "You've got permission to monitor this room until Jeff wakes up, okay?"

"Understood, Commander. I'll inform you if there appears to be any change in his condition. I
remind you that Operative Lawson has done a more thorough examination than I am capable of, however, and she was not concerned."

"I know. Just keep an eye on him for me."

Joker woke to the smell of coffee and Shepard's hand on his shoulder.

He said "Mmmph" and reached for the mug.

"We're about fifteen minutes out from the relay," she said quietly. "Tali's given us the all-clear for the jump."

He wanted to roll over and go back to sleep, preferably for days, but after a few seconds the meaning of her words sunk in and he sat up. At least his headache was gone. The coffee was strong and sweet and partially made up for the truncated rest. "$"Kay." He sipped again. "$ M up."

"You've got time for a quick shower if you want one. Towel's on the shelf." She kissed his temple. "See you in ten."

She was waiting for him in the cockpit, leaning against the railing around EDI's projection. The last fuzz of sleep slipped away as he settled into his familiar position and took control of the ship back from EDI.

"How'd she do?" Shepard asked.

He scanned the read-outs. "Not bad. Nicely done, EDI."

"You had already set the FTL course, Jeff. I did not have to make any corrections."

"Oh, gold star for me, then. Thanks for keeping an eye out, anyway. I needed the sleep."

"I do not have 'an eye' to 'keep out,' but you are welcome. It is not an efficient use of resources to have you watch the helm during FTL transit. If your skills were actually needed you would not have logged 23.4 hours attempting to set Shepard's mission footage to music."

Rhi jumped, face brightening in a surprised grin. "You what?"

He turned away, embarrassed. "I was never actually successful. You could try to keep some kind of tempo."

She snorted. "Not bloody likely. I used to target shoot to Another One Bites the Dust, until I realized I was always firing in rhythm. Habits like that are dangerous. Too predictable."

He turned to grin at her. "Queen?"

She sniffed. "Everything's more bad-ass with Queen."

"Can't argue with that."

Their banter was a pleasant distraction from the reality of what their mission; the conversation eased the dead silence that filled the ship. We're finally doing it. Sure, the relay that loomed in front of them when he eased them out of FTL would only take them to the Omega system – the mysterious Omega-4 was another few hours beyond that – but it was a step towards The End. It felt strange to finally be heading for their target after months of planning and preparation. He wondered
what it would have felt like with everyone there. Would there have been celebration, or the same fearful hush?

When he started the run to the relay he absently passed Shepard his coffee so he could use both hands. There was nothing automatic about piloting a relay jump. The relay itself did all the work of moving the ship – hell, Shepard had driven a mako through one; theoretically you could use anything with enough shocks to survive the landing – but the massive amount of eezo they contained created unpredictable forces in the surrounding space. It was a constant dance to nail the approach – and approach was everything.

The hull shuddered almost imperceptibly as they were flung across light years. The bright glow of the relay was replaced with the dusty star field of Omega.

"Omega nebula. All systems nominal, minimal drift."

He looked up as the ladar registered the relay comm buoy. There wouldn't be a comm by the Omega-4. No one came out of that relay except collectors. This is it. Seeing the buoy made it all seem real. "Last call."

Rhi looked down at the two cups of coffee she was holding, then back up at him, confused.

"Comm buoy," he explained. "Last chance to call home or wherever before…" he trailed off. This might actually be the end. A fragment of an old song drifted melancholy through his mind. We'll be gone before the dawn returns, like voices on the wind. "Y'know. Make any arrangements or whatever." Say goodbyes. "We're only in range for about half an hour. You should probably start."

"Announce it for the others," she said. "There's no one I'd call." Her mouth twisted. "And I suppose my funeral arrangements were already taken care of two years ago."

It was the first time she'd admitted that they might not come back. It was as strange as hearing her voluntarily mention her death.

He found it hard to believe there was no one off of the Normandy she'd want to talk to. She collected people like some people collected rocks. It must be isolating, coming back from the dead. "Surely there's someone. People you knew before…"

"Not a lot of time to renew old acquaintances, since I woke up. And the few I tried… well." She shrugged, awkwardly. "I'll give you some privacy."

"Wait." I was right. Of course I was. "What about the 'few you tried'?"

"I sent a few messages, months ago, while we were on the Citadel. To Geltz – he's the N who brought me in. A few other friends." She shrugged again. "Nothing. Probably thought it was some prankster with a foul sense of humor. And my best bud, well – she worked in intelligence; I assume she still does. I wasn't about to contact her. Message from a terrorist organization could cost her job."

"What about Ness?"

She brightened a little. "Hell. I kind of forgot about Ness." She scrubbed a hand over her eyes. "That sounds awful, doesn't it? But she wasn't part of my life for years. It's weird that I even know where she is now."

"So," he chided, "call her."
"I will." She stooped to kiss the top of his head (nice enough for the hat, but a waste of a kiss, really), handed back his coffee, and left him to stare at the screens.

He'd pushed her into making one last call. Who was he going to reach out to?

He thought guiltily of his father, and of his little sister – half-sister, really. *Little. She has to be in her teens now.* Shit. He'd never meant to cut off contact with his family. It had just happened. They'd left a string of messages, frantic after the wreck of the Normandy SR1. At first he didn't return the calls because it was still too raw to talk about it, too racked with pain that they worried about him when the bravest woman he'd ever known was dead. Eventually the unanswered messages gained their own burden of guilt, the reminder of calls he should have and hadn't made, deepening over months of depression until he hadn't known how to bridge the gulf of silence. If he called them he'd have a whole six months silence to apologize for. Then six months became a year. Then two. Then he was working for Cerberus.

They'd be in real-time comm range for half an hour. He didn't have time to even begin to explain, or to say what they meant to him, or how sorry he was for his long silence, or for breaking it like this. He certainly didn't have time to say goodbye.

*No. Keep it simple.* He pulled up his omni-tool and had patched a text-only connection through the buoy.

A waiting symbol flashed while the program pinged Alenko's omni-tool. It was a full two minutes before it lit up with an answering message.

kA: Joker! What's up?

The icon Kaidan used for his private account was a still of a game avatar; a Galaxy of Fantasy brawler with a shit-eating grin. It always seemed incredibly out-of-character—probably why Kaidan had chosen it. It certainly didn't fit the pathos of the moment.

jM: Look, Kaidan… um.

He should have used the two minute wait to figure out how to phrase it. *Leaving on suicide mission, might die, just a heads up* seemed over-blunt, even for him. *Maybe 'Might die. BRB – OR NOT! Dum dum duuum!' would be better.*

kA: You don't have to type 'um'.

jM: I totally do. Have a big favor to ask, and it's just not right without the awkward 'um'.

kA: Is this going to be the embarrassing kind of favor?

jM: No, but I could try to think of one if you want.

kA: Just imagine my long-suffering sigh here, will you? I'll pass. What do you need?

jM: You have access to Alliance intel about the Omega-4 relay, right?

kA: ! I can't pass you confidential information, dude.

jM: I KNOW that! But we're hitting it in about two hours. Will you be able to find out, uh, whether or not we come back out again?
kA: !?! What the hell are you doing? What's Shepard thinking?

jM: I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you. Or possibly twelve innocent bystanders.

jM: I still haven't gotten this whole 'terrorist thing' down quite yet.

kA: You are one sick fuck, man.

jM: I'll have you know I'm a damn good fuck. I'm just not into you in that way.

kA: Why do I bother communicating with you again?

jM: I'm sorry. I meant to let you down gently.

jM: But seriously – I don't know what's going to happen. If we don't make it back out, I've got a safe-deposit box on Arcturus. Can you get the contents to my dad and my aunt? I'll send you the code. Their info's in there – Dad's on Tiptree, Renee's on Terra Nova. It's all legal and everything.

There was a long pause before Kaidan's response. The avatar grinned at him.

kA: Shit. You're serious.

jM: I'm not doin' this for shits and giggles, K. Can you do it?

kA: Yeah, of course. But don't make me, okay? You're obnoxious and possibly nuts and you owe me a drink. I'll be expecting to hear about you coming back through that relay.

jM: Givin' it our best shot. And our best is pretty frickin' amazing – I mean, we're talking Shepard, and she's got me. We're gonna kick all kinds of ass. But just in case…

kA: If things get rough, you can probably use your ego as a shield. Just a thought.

jM: No way. Do you know how hard I worked to grow it that big? Have to preserve it so I can win the blue ribbon at the Arcturus Dysfunctional Personality Fair.

kA: I have no idea how to respond to that. I'm sure you'll be a shoe-in.

jM: If I bite it I'm sending it to you. In a box.

kA: I already want you to survive. You don't have to threaten me.

jM: Seriously, though –

kA: Yeah, in case. I'll handle it. Good luck, Joker.

jM: Kaidan -- thanks. For everything.

The deck felt lonelier than it had a few seconds before. Funny how something as tenuous as a text comm link could remind him of everything they were leaving behind. He longed for some of the driven certainty he'd felt when they'd chased Saren.

He was relieved when Rhi came back, carrying a case from the armory. She sat on the floor near him and started disassembling her pistol, checking and cleaning each piece with practiced care.
"What's our ETA?"

"One hour 26 minutes." They spoke in hushed tones

"Have you eaten? I've got ration bars in my pocket."

"Not… really hungry right now. Thanks."

She handed him a bar anyway. "I don't think anyone is, but you still need fuel." She had a half-eaten bar herself, probably not her first. Smart biotics pre-loaded before they went into battle. She finished it before she'd finished with the carnifex and opened another.

I wish I'd had time to make her dinner again. He was unbelievably grateful that she'd brought her prep work out to him instead of finishing in the armory or her quarters. The quiet was kinder with her there.

It was still too quiet, though. He grasped for something to break the silence, something to alleviate the gloom. "So… where do you want to go out to eat?"

She looked up, startled. A rag was poking halfway out of the pistol barrel in her hand. "I don't know. You said someplace fancy, right?"

"Yeah. But, y'know, a good burger joint's not bad, either…"

"You can pick," she said. "After all, you're paying."

He raised his eyebrows. "Wow. I never pegged you for a traditionalist."

"Ha. Fuck tradition. I'm flat broke."

He laughed. "Wait. You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. No one's actually paying me. Everything I've bought since I woke up was with credits embezzled from Cerberus. Or, y'know, chits left in dead guy's wallets. I've no idea what happened to my accounts when I… after. I probably should've tried to find out, but… it seemed too complicated." She jabbed the cleaning cloth down the barrel thoughtfully. "This is why you should never bother with savings accounts."

Too complicated. Ya think? He'd never thought about that part. There were rules for people killed in the line of duty without surviving kin, of course, but he had no idea what they were – they'd never been relevant to him. Doesn't their stuff go to auction or something? It was creepy to think about things being sold posthumously to strangers. No wonder Rhi didn't want to pursue it.

"Someplace fancy, then," he said.

She smiled at him, nestled the re-assembled pistol in the case, and moved on to the shotgun. This time, they didn't let the silence grow.

Others stopped by; Tali, Garrus, even Jack, exchanging a few words before they left to complete their own prep. When they were alone they talked of little, unimportant things. What they'd done for fun on shore leave, fresh to the alliance. Flight school and boot camp. People they'd known.

He asked about the friend who worked in intelligence, the one she hadn't been willing to contact, and she grinned. "Sydney. I was stationed with her boyfriend for a while – she dumped his ass pretty quick, but she and I hit it off. Used to watch stupid action flicks and pick on all the shit they
got wrong." She chuckled. "Shit, she convinced me to take *singing lessons* with her, once."

It was strange to picture Shepard doing something so peaceful. *I bet she has a beautiful voice.* It wasn't hard to imagine – a rich contralto with a hint of scotch and cigarettes, the kind of voice that could send sexy shivers up your spine – though knowing her taste in music he had to wonder what she'd sung.

"How'd she manage that? Was it really hard to convince you?"

"I was looking for a way to fill a few months between deployments, and her first suggestion was dancing lessons. The next was scrapbooks. I chose singing before she got all the way down to underwater basket weaving."

"Okay, now you know my embarrassing occasional hobby." She ducked her head to hide the slight flush to her cheeks and gave the shotgun part more attention than it probably needed.

"What? That's not embarrassing. That's awesome!" *Someone who can kick ass, take names, and sing? You just keep getting better and better.* The glow of fond pride he felt when he looked at her was almost overwhelming, a strange warm spot in the dull fatalism that had hung over him since the collector attack. *Mine.*

She shrugged and held part of the shotgun up to the light.

"Seriously! There is nothing embarrassing about singing. Damn. See, I shoulda kept playing."

"Piano. Really lame when you're a teen, and there weren't exactly a lot of ways for me to do the standard-rebellion thing, so I quit."

"Wish you hadn't?"

"Eh. Miss music, not piano specifically. Been wanting to try pick up guitar for years, but there's never any room on a ship, or any privacy to practice until you don't suck."

She laughed. "I hear that. I was lucky, when I first started – I'd already paid to have my apartment hyper insulated so the neighbors wouldn't complain about the sound system. Never did keep up practicing on deployments, though. Syd eventually gave up on her dreams of an all-alliance quartet."

She finished with the shotgun and pulled out a tiny brushed metal case. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she bent forward and reached for the back of her head. "Some people find this kinda weird. S'okay if you look away," she mumbled, her chin bent down to her chest.

He watched, naturally.

There was a faint click when she disengaged the biotic amp from the implant and drew it out of the socket in her skull. It was no bigger around than a pencil, maybe four millimeters at most. A line of tiny indicator lights flashed along the side of the cylinder.

She set it carefully in the case and started an omni-tool diagnostic, nodding to herself as each item on her mental checklist was completed. Finally she used a tiny tool to flip the head off, spilling two metal discs into her hand.

"Batteries?" He asked, surprised.
"Yup." She placed the new ones with tweezers. "The extra power has to come from somewhere."

"I suppose I never thought about it. I mean – they're tiny. That's crazy."

"Compared to the electricity in your nervous system? A watch battery packs one hell of a punch." She waved a disinfectant wand over the amp and slid it back into her implant, shivering a little as it sunk home.

"How far out are we?"

"Thirty minutes," he whispered.

"You'll make the jump, Joker." She stood up and started stretching. "We'll do this."

When it was down to twenty minutes, she reached around the chair to hug him. "I have to go armor up."

He held her arm to his chest and kissed her fingers, relishing the touch of skin to skin before it was encased in cold hard armor. The last touch?

She must have read his mind, because she whispered "Not the last time, Jeff," into his ear. Her breath was warm against his cheek. Then it was gone, and her footsteps receded down the gangway.

Ten minutes later she stood behind him, a stern warrior encased in blue armor, and ordered General Quarters. The ship’s hush became more charged as they took their positions, ready for whatever they might encounter after the jump.

The Omega-4 relay was an ominous glow ahead of them, visible to the naked eye. Beyond was uncharted space, the home of their enemy, and maybe, hopefully, their lost crew. Few ships had ever gone through the Omega 4. Only collectors had ever returned.

Joker stretched his wrists.

This was the jump that counted.

Chapter End Notes

We're fast approaching the end, here. Thanks to everyone who's stuck around through this mammoth story. I never expected so many readers (or such a high word count) when I started!

The song Joker refers to is Lord Grenville by Al Stewart, about a suicidal naval battle against a far greater force (It sets the tone of the chapter beautifully, if you happen to look it up). Coincidentally, the first line of the song is taken from the poem The Revenge - a Ballad of the Fleet by Tennyson, whom Ashley mentions as a favorite poet in Mass Effect 1.

This chapter has a lot of game dialogue mixed in with my original additions; as usual, if you can find it on YouTube, it was probably written by Bioware, not me. :P
Shepard rested a hand on the back of Joker's chair, eyes fixed on the approaching relay. The dust of the Omega nebula made the light from the relay's massive core appear dim and red. She couldn't tell if it actually looked wrong or if it was just her mind unhelpfully projecting visions of doom.

Whatever it looked like, she assumed it was still sending out all the right 'I'm an ancient piece of alien magic, fly your ship through me!' signals. Joker was announcing their approach, voice as calm and even as it would have been for a simple jump back to Earth. Her gaze drifted down for a moment to watch his hands move confidently over the controls.

The relay grew still bigger as he took them into the final approach. They were close enough to see clearly through the obscuring haze of the nebula, and the light from the relay was still red.

"Joker," she asked, "what's with the color?"

EDI answered for him. "The relay's destination is the galactic core. Radiation passing through the Mass Relay Corridor is being red-shifted by the high gravitational field on the other side."

Joker nodded briefly. "It must be crazy over there. Might want to strap in for this one."

She nodded and took the copilot's seat, pulling up the five-point restraint. She'd rather be at her normal post behind his chair, ready to run or fight at a moment's notice, but if all hell broke loose she'd just be another distraction tumbling around the deck. If anything went wrong on this part of the mission, there was fuck all she could do anyway. It's all you, Joker.

Armored plating slid over the windows and a view from the ship's external cams blinked to life on the screen in front of her.

"Omega-4 relay, final approach." Joker pulled the emergency breather into position near his chin, standard safeguard for an unknown relay.

"Reaper IFF activated and acknowledged," EDI said.

"Hitting the relay in 10… 9…"

"Commander!" That was Jacob, helping Tali in engineering. "Drive core just lit up like a Christmas tree!"

"6…"

"Drive core electrical charge at critical levels. Rerouting power."

Too close to pull back now. Unplanned maneuvers this close to a relay could shear a ship in two.

Joker's voice was as calm as ever. "3… 2… 1."

The Normandy shivered as the relay caught them. The data on Joker's screen was flashing by almost too fast for her to read – not that she'd have understood it, anyway. All she knew was that relay jumps didn't usually take this long. She swore she could feel the energy bleeding along the hull of the Normandy, a frisson in her eezo-laced nerves. Around her the ship hummed. She
reached for a patch of metal on the chair and a spark jumped from her finger, more powerful than the usual small discharges that came with being a biotic.

You didn't usually have time to notice things like that, in a relay jump.

"Brace for deceleration."

Rhi had just enough time to glance at EDI's projection in surprise – dropping out of a jump was usually as imperceptible as going in – and then the wave of force hit, pressing her forward into the safety harness.

"Shit!" Joker's hands flew over the controls.

A second later her screens lit up with exterior visuals. They'd emerged in a debris field, a nightmare of rocks and jagged metal, moving faster than they could hope to account for. This was no asteroid belt, an impressive but basically safe place for Joker to practice slaloms. The view twisted 90 degrees as he spun the Normandy to avoid a massive piece of – not rock, with those lines. Ship wreckage.

Something huge appeared out of nowhere in the monitors, like a scare-scene out of a cheap vid. The 3D extrapolation showed Joker rolling the Normandy away, the trash passing harmlessly below them. One jagged bit of metal cleared the space under the hull by mere meters. We should be measuring that in kilometers.

Joker's rapid course changes were too much for their inertial barriers, but she barely felt the tug and pull of the restraints against her armor. Her attention was on Joker and the deadly obstacle course outside. He was absolutely intent, a bead of sweat on his temple the only sign of pressure. The deadly cloud of space trash shifted unpredictably, to her eyes, but he was finding spaces before they were there, threading the Normandy through gaps that were impossibly small, until they emerged into (relatively) clear space, like a cork from a bottle.

Joker exhaled in relief and slumped backwards. "Too close."

Shepard unstrapped and resumed her usual position behind his chair. The debris field stretched away below them, dense and massive. A list of knowns paraded through the back of her mind: center of the galaxy; co-orbiting black holes; too many conflicting gravitational forces for the debris to accrete into a few big, easily avoidable chunks. Or the collectors blow it all back up again when it does, just in case of visitors.

Joker zoomed in on one of the bits of space trash below them and whistled. "These must be all the ships that tried to make it through the Omega-4 relay. Some look ancient." The Normandy's scanners painted a bewildering variety of shapes. "Here, isn't that a turian symbol? And that curved wing – that looks like old asari design. Like, old old. Two generations before their current fleet – and you know asari don't change their designs often. That could've been made while humanity was still grunting and hitting shit with rocks."

"Humanity is still grunting and hitting things with rocks," EDI observed.

"Only some of the time," Joker said. "We have our good days."

"Any sign of the collectors?" Shepard asked.

"I have detected an energy signature near the edge of the accretion disk."

"Has to be the collector base. Take us in for a closer look. Nice and slow – hug the trash pile if you
can, see if we can't use it as camouflage."

"Aye aye." He guided the Normandy down to skim the debris. The object EDI had detected grew clearer as they went, the Normandy's sensors picking up more of its external shape. It was a rough cylinder, like the collector ship on an even more massive scale.

Shepard saw the blip on the ladar just as EDI said "Careful, Jeff. We have company."

Joker's fingers were already moving. "Taking evasive action."

*What are they?* Jeff's screens were incomprehensible to her; strings of numbers and bare-bones wire-frames marked with vector data. The only thing she could tell about their pursuers was that they were small and fast. She slid back into the copilot's chair and muttered "EDI, help me out, here. What's behind us?" She had all the data at hand somewhere under her fingers, but hell if she knew where.

EDI silently brought her screen to life, displaying available info in ways Rhi could parse. The hostiles targeting the Normandy were smaller than the shuttle, roughly spherical, and – a flash of red indicated a weapon strike along the Normandy's armored hull – they could bite. The little pests didn't seem to have heard of the concept of inertia; they changed direction on a dime.

"Now they're just pissing me off." Joker scowled at the screen and pulled the Normandy out of a tight loop that placed one of the spheres in their line of fire. Twin shots from the javelin torpedoes smashed it into dust, but there were six more on their tail.

They'd never be able to out-maneuver them all long enough to bring the thanix cannon to bear. *Everything that's not weapon must be eezo, for them to move like that.* "EDI, arm the point defenses." GARDIAN lasers were made to deal with close, fast threats. Their auto-lock system was useless in a debris field, and a human wouldn't fire the lasers in time to do any good, but EDI had no such limitations.

"Yeah, EDI, take these bastards out!"

There was a rattle of boots on the gangway and Miranda burst into the cockpit. "I've got a read on their firepower. We'll be fine – as long as the new plating holds." She sounded more worried than reassuring.

*Not helping, Miranda.* "It'll be fine," Shepard said. "Watch EDI go."

"An unshackled AI –"

The displays lit up as the GARDIANs fired in quick succession, each shot finding and eliminating a target.

"– is a great benefit in combat," Miranda finished.

"Glad you see it that way."

Thank you," EDI said. "But there are still hostile craft remaining outside of my range."

"They want another round?" Joker stroked his console with one finger and the Normandy went into another spin. "C'mon, girl, let's give it to them."

"Proximity is required for effective offensive use of the point defense system," EDI reminded him.
"Yeah, straight through the middle, I got it. C'mon, little gnats, here comes the Normandy…"

Closing on them wasn't difficult – the things were aiming for short-range combat themselves. The GARDIANs flashed again, setting off a trio of small explosions, and then a warning claxon sounded and every light in the cockpit went red.

Shepard was out of her chair in a heart beat, nerves singing with tension. Not again, not again. She knew what it was – only one thing warranted that alarm. Last time she'd heard it she'd run to evacuate Joker, shoving him into an escape pod just before the collectors had blown the Normandy apart around her. Panic gripped her throat in iron claws, stealing her air just as her severed oxygen supply had.

"Hull breach! Emergency fields are holding but there's something in the hangar!"


"Keep trying to lose 'em. I've got this one. Miranda, stay here and give Joker anything he asks for."

She seated her helmet at the run and radioed for back up. "Let's go see what this thing is. Thane, Mordin – meet us in the hangar." She wanted Tali, but without their crew the quarian was more use minding the engines.

"EDI," she said as they went, "What happened? How'd it get in?"

"Single-use charges mounted on the drone's exterior breached our armor," EDI explained. "the drone's core has entered the ship."

Joker normally would have jumped on the comedic opportunities of "Miranda, give Joker anything he asks for" ('a peeled grape' sprang to mind; it only got cruder from there) but his attention was elsewhere. There'd been one more alert almost lost in the clangor caused by the hull breach; a tiny light on the ground-team monitor, normally a steady pulse, had abruptly sped. Shepard's heart-rate, relayed to the Normandy by her armor, had gone through the roof.

She'd been terrified.

And then she'd raced to the gaping hole in their ship to give the intruder hell, anyway.

It was ridiculous that he could be more worried about her fear than the very real threat of death hanging over all of them, or the unknown hostile that had just entered their ship. It hadn't even shown in her face – just in that little light, the only one of the array that had changed its steady rhythm.

And he worried.

They'd been holed, all right – in more than one place. Either the drone had made itself a few new exits once it got inside, or it had friends.

Shepard reflexively checked her helmet seals for the fifth time since she'd left the cockpit. Find the hostile. The Normandy's fine for now. Keep her that way. Light reflecting off the smaller particles in the debris field colored the view outside a murky orange. It made it easier to pretend it wasn't open space.
Her attention had rested on the gaps too long; Thane saw the enemy first. "5 o'clock, Shepard."

"Roger." Shepard sidestepped behind a crate. The thing was big: an armored sphere interrupted only by the glowing red muzzle of its weapon. "One hostile," she radioed Joker, "We've got it covered. Looks like a synthetic. Giant floating eye-ball thing."

A heat-sink's worth of close-range incendiary ammo only served to alert it to her position, and she dove sideways just as a red particle beam scorched the deck where she'd stood.

"Correction. Laser eyeball." She popped briefly above the panel, shooting back along the beam's line-of-fire without bothering to aim properly.

"Flying laser eyeball," Thane confirmed.

"Spherical synthetic weapon with a partic –" the beam cut the spot where Mordin had been a moment before, "– ahem. Laser eyeball."

"If you're all tripping I don't have time to deal with it!" Joker's voice rang over the comm.

"No worries, Joker!"

Three more hefty shots from her heavy pistol didn't even seem to have phased it. "Mordin, left, Thane, right – keep its attention divided. Thane, try to pull a chink in its armor – that's ship-grade plating, it's not going to go down to normal fire."

"Excellent," said Mordin, "Prepared special fire."

She heard the thunk of a specialized charge attaching itself to metal. Moments later a burst of flame in her peripheral version painted the inside of the hull with lurid shadows. "Now, Thane!" There was a bright blue flash, biotic energy bleeding into the visible spectrum, as Thane created a field of conflicting forces near the weak point Mordin had created. The armor on the thing's left side was shattered and smoking.

Shepard stepped out into the open and fired while she advanced, pressing the advantage, and the thing turned tail and fled.

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Joker couldn't let himself be distracted by the fight in the hangar – the one against the drone or the one in Rhi's head. Shepard would do her job. He'd do his. He scanned the sensor displays restlessly, almost eager for the next attack. Gimme something to do.

He saw the tell-tale blips soon enough; another flock of drones was on an intercept course. They'd been annoying before, but now they had access to the Normandy – and to Shepard, down in the hangar.

He adjusted their course slightly and poured on the speed, bringing the thrusters up as hot as he dared given the damage to the hull. They had to stop eventually, but if he could just buy Rhi some time –

"Hangar cleared," Shepard reported. "We didn't take it out, though – it may come back."

"If that one doesn't, there're more on the way."

Another bunch of energy signatures appeared dead in front of them. Shit. "We're sitting ducks out here! I'm going to try to lose them in the debris field. It may get exciting down there."
"Roger. Give us a second to secure. Thane, Mordin – lock on. It may get rough." There was a pause while she waited for confirmations, then, "Okay, Joker. Make her dance."

"With pleasure." He grinned. The exit from the relay had been pure frantic hell. There'd been no way to prepare for any of it, and it had been all he could do to get them through the debris field in one piece. The moments of relative calm above it had given him a breather, a chance to get a sense of their environment.

This time, he was ready.

He slipped the Normandy past the first layer of junk like thread through a needle, into the space that the ladar painted beyond it, a space that was closing even as the ship passed through into the next one, wings nearly brushing the burnt-out carapace of a dreadnought, hull gliding under something that could have been rock or some strange ship architecture, all of it reduced to specks in their rear view as he looked for the next opening.

"Our kinetic barriers are not designed to withstand impact with debris of that size, Jeff," EDI cautioned.

"Good thing we're not going to hit any of it then, isn't it?"

They gained speed with every meter, and he was pointing her at spots that weren't there yet, finding holes before they happened. Behind them the edge of the their eezo field was catching the detritus, leaving a wake of chaos, but he was out in front, kilometers ahead, where two pieces of machinery were just passing each other, making space to slip his wings through if he turned just so, silver and black shooting through the space-pocked derelicts with mere meters to spare, already on the next opening.

One of the drones crashed on an obstacle thrown by the passage of the Normandy; another was crushed trying to follow her through a space that had become too small for it. EDI and Miranda kept track of them for him; he was flying.

"C'mon, baby," he crooned, "Dance for me."

The Normandy couldn't flip end-for-end like the little shits chasing them; she was a dual-environment ship, designed with the limitations of atmospheric flight in mind, and her thrusters couldn't position for that kind of long-axis spin. She could pirouette, though, and she did, rolling around the long line of her central guns to take advantage of every available space.

Deeper into the disk the debris was thicker, the spaces fewer. "C'mon, baby, find some room." He felt the anguished shriek of ceramic against metal as they shot through a gap that wasn't quite big enough for them and he whispered apologies to the ship.

"Six down, but there are more on our tail," Miranda warned.

Straight through the thick of it, then up and out. He wasn't looking for a clean run anymore, just minimized damage. "EDI, reroute non-critical power to the barriers. This is going to hurt."

Shepard cursed as she felt herself go weightless. EDI must've pulled the power for another system; things were getting hot out there. Bending her knees pulled her body closer to her boots, securely locked to the Normandy's deck. She braced herself against the strut she'd chosen and gripped her pistol, wiggling her feet inside her boots to convince herself they weren't going anywhere. "Hang tight, people."
The view outside had already been dizzying; with the cessation of the artificial gravity it became nauseating. She picked a stable point on a bulkhead and focused on that, willing her stomach to settle.

The Normandy twisted again, and Joker was practically singing in her ear, coaxing every last bit out of the ship. "C'mon, baby, we can do this."

She didn't think she'd made a sound, but he must have remembered their radio link, because he said "Uh, that was – just ignore me."

She made sure she wasn't transmitting to anyone else, and murmured "It's okay, Joker. I know when you're talking to the ship." For a moment a rush of fondness muted her fear. She was smiling at the inside of her helmet.

"This is most unsettling," Thane said. He gulped, the sound loud on their radios, and Shepard wondered if drell got the same response to motion sickness that humans did. She'd never thought to ask.

"Look at the wall," she recommended.

"Normal reaction to physical stressors outside evolutionary parameters," Mordin said. He gasped a bit. "Unpleasant."

"Indeed," Thane agreed. "Shepard, I admit – in all of my years of work, I have never done this without a proper restraint."

"You'll be fine." She was ridiculously glad for his admission; it was easier to deal with if she had someone else to reassure. "We trained for this stuff. No more dangerous than most null gee work, as long as your stomach doesn't get you." And you don't fly out the big fucking hole in your ship. Her throat tightened at the thought. No, Deep breaths. She lifted her heel a bit; the boot was still solidly locked. "Though I admit, I haven't actually been in a situation like this since, god, Ceres." Talking was good. Talking kept you grounded.

"What happened on Ceres?"

"Long story." The details were confidential – even if the story was mostly about vomit. Other people's, not that it mattered much. Her stomach lurched. Yeah, definitely not a good time for that story. "How about you, Mordin? Any exciting tales from the STG?"

The ship rolled and shuddered as she scraped against something too big for their barrier to handle, the sound of straining metal propagating oddly in the thin atmosphere left in the hangar. C'mon, Joker. You can do it. She wanted to be up there, watching his hands, the set line of his jaw – but there were big fucking holes in her ship, and she wasn't going to let some stupid laser eyeball get what crew she had left.


"No time like the present!" It really wasn't so bad, as long as you didn't look outside. With the art-grav gone there was no ground to feel spinning.

"One can certainly hope there won't be," Thane agreed dryly.

"Ha!" Shepard felt the tug of the art grav slowly cycling back up. "We through, Joker?"

"I think we lost them. Gonna go nice and slow now, see if we can't avoid any more attention."
There were a few seconds of quiet while the ideas of 'up' and 'down' slowly reasserted themselves. When Joker spoke next the hangar had reached a quarter G. "You've got incoming, Shepard. Just one, starboard – sorry. I thought I'd lost them all!"

"Roger. We can handle one." Third of a G. She turned off the electromagnets and crossed half the hangar in three long bounds, crouching near the starboard breach. "C'mon, let's get this over with."

It was too much to hope that their assailant would be the same drone they'd injured earlier. The one that slipped in through the starboard breach was undamaged, though like the other it had shed its outer layer.

They'd learned what worked on the first one. Mordin and Thane fanned out, skulking around the edges of the hangar, while she tried to hold the eye's attention.

"EDI, hold at current art grav!" They were up to half a G, now, and the last thing she needed was to fall on her face because gravity had been less when she jumped than when she landed. The low G force made it easier to dodge the thing, too; she could leap obstacles instead of scrambling over them.

She lead it a chase and then hunkered behind a strut and shouted for Mordin and Thane to do their thing. The resulting explosion gave her a moment to catch her breath, then she was up and over the top again, running up a pile of cargo to get a better angle at the weak point her team had blown in the armor. The drone was only disoriented for a moment; it started firing its beam weapon before it had aimed properly, burning a hole through the crate she stood on. She leapt clear, rolling to her feet on the other side. The beam weapon had continued up and was now firing uselessly towards the ceiling, where the tougher material of the bulkheads seemed to be withstanding its power.

The crate she'd been standing on was sliced clear through. That had been the one the gym equipment was packed in. *Guess we're back to push-ups and crunches.* The rest of the hangar manifest flicked through her mind; nothing they couldn't afford to lose. Mostly extra provisions, and this trip was going to be short, one way or another.

She skirted the pile of cargo and had to avert her eyes as Mordin lit off more of his pyrotechnics. With the after-image of the explosion still flickering in her peripheral vision she advanced, trying to draw its fire away from the salarian. "Look at me, asshole!"

The eye swiveled around to look at her, but this time before it could charge up she landed two shots square in the glowing red weapon port that made its pupil. The slugs must have hit something delicate, because the steady red glow fractured and started emitting electrical sparks.

She hit the deck just as the drone exploded.

Instead of a rain of shrapnel on her back, she saw a burst of light over her right shoulder – and heard laughter and applause from Mordin and Thane.

She rolled up onto one shoulder and looked around, confused. The eye was nowhere in sight. "What the hell? Where is it?"

Thane walked over to give her a hand up, an uncharacteristic smile on his lips. "Oh? I had thought you'd planned that, Siha. It seems you have spoiled your own mystique."

Mordin was clearer. "Hypothesis: Damage to weapon caused internal explosion. Forces not enough to burst armor, so energy channeled through existing outlet. There." He pointed at the charred and smoking remnants of a crate that had once held emergency rations. A blackened Tabasco bottle fell
out while she watched and rolled a short way across the deck.

"So where's the eye?"

"For every action," Mordin said, smiling, "An equal and opposite –"

"– Reaction." She followed the line of blackened deck from the burst cargo unit backwards, straight out one of the breaches in the hull. "It shot itself out of the ship?"

"Do not believe it was intentional. Had moved beyond that point."

"If the eye has a soul, then it went to join Kalahira across the sea." Thane smirked. "Backwards."

Shepard laughed aloud.

"Everyone okay down there?" Joker asked.


"I'm always telling you," Tali said, smug.

"Better get back up here, Commander," Joker said. "We're getting close."

Shepard brought a feeling of victory with her onto the bridge that Joker couldn't help but catch.

"There's our rabbit," he said, pointing at the looming shape on the screens.

"The collector base." Miranda sounded almost reverent.

*We've been after this damn thing long enough.* It felt strange to finally be here. The base itself was eerily, rising out of the edge of the debris field like an ancient ship rising above the troubled sea.

"See if you can find a place to land without drawing attention."

It was hard to tell what *would* draw attention; to the naked eye the base looked halfway between a massive rock formation and a random collection of space station parts. Their scanners could do better, though, and EDI would be faster at parsing the data than he would. He was about to ask her advice when the ladar showed him something he recognized all too well; the unmistakeable shape of the collector ship, its huge form dwarfed by the even more mammoth station.

"Too late! Looks like they're sending an old friend out to greet us."

The cruiser pulled away from its mother and turning to face them, the yawning depths of the muzzle of its massive weapon pointing in their direction, just as it had over Alchera, when it took down the SR1. But it hadn't had time to gain speed, and the *Normandy* had all the advantages of momentum on her side. When the beam weapon lanced out, Joker nimbly moved around it, using their greater speed and agility to dance teasingly out of the way.

"Time to show 'em our new teeth." Shepard's voice was low and throaty, filled with the thrill of the hunt.

*Sexy as all get out.*

"Garrus, ready on the main gun. Joker, get us a line."
"Gladly."

He spun them out around the collector's line of fire and faked hard port, jerking the *Normandy* back once the more ponderous collector ship had committed itself, buying them a few precious seconds' view of the cruiser's less-defended port side, where an irregular structure jutting from the main hull offered a tempting target. "Warming. 5, 4," each number was another sliver of their firing window falling away, "3, 2 --" he slammed his fist down. The Thanix cannons, mounted under their hull on that fateful trip to Omega, roared to life.

A molten stream of metal, blue-white with heat, shot from the *Normandy* and seared its way into the collector ship. Fire blossomed at the point of impact, exploding down the side of the vessel as the intense heat dissipated itself within the hull.

He was already flying on wings of adrenaline; finally getting to fire on the ship that had caused him so much grief pushed him over the top, and he bounced in his chair, punching the air. "How d'you like that, you sons of bitches?!"

Shepard leaned low over his shoulder. "Can you get at their broadside?"

That was how they'd taken out the SR1 two years ago; a shot amidships that she couldn't hope to withstand, his ship crippled around him, a massive hull breach that left the CIC open to the stars -- and to the attack that blew Shepard away from the escape pod and out into the blackness.

He licked his lips. Fitting to take the collectors out the same way.

He poured on the speed, pushing the limits of the *Normandy*'s compromised hull. Compared to his ship the collector vessel was a fat, slow target, but it only had to pivot to keep its heavily armored prow in their direction. As long as he had to cover a hundred times the distance his quarry did, he'd never be able to get at its flank.

"Have to get in closer."

"Do it." Shepard's expression was all teeth. "Finish them off."

"Gonna be a wild ride!" He bared his teeth, grin as feral as Shepard's, and pointed their nose at the injured cruiser. The collectors fired again, their beam weapon a long, bright line, and he danced around it, first on one side, then the other, until they were close enough to look down the yawning muzzle of the gun itself. Then he slipped sideways, spiraling wide around the cruiser, forcing the collectors to try to track the *Normandy* or leave themselves exposed when she came about.

Come about she did, shooting out from under the collectors' hull into the tightest half-loop her thrusters could manage, with a full, beautiful view of the cruiser's broadside, wide open for the stream of silver destruction he fired.

Shepard's whoop joined his as the thanix' deadly payload hit home. He took them past their target, ready to come around again, but they didn't need another shot. The cruiser was splintering, a cascade of reactions ripping it apart from the inside out.

*Time to get outta here.* He turned the *Normandy*'s nose towards the collector base, giving her a victory roll as he went.

They were heading away from the broken vessel when the chain reaction finally hit its drive core.

The cruiser had been huge; the energy of its exploding core was immense. What had felt like a safe distance was closed in the blink of an eye, and the wave of force picked the *Normandy* up and
shook it.

Their kinetic barriers overloaded in seconds. Joker shrieked as his chest lit up with pain, and for a moment his watering eyes saw only white. The hit must have negated the inertial damping ability of the mass effect field, pressing him into his restraint harness – and pressing the harness into his broken rib. The familiar feeling of zero-grav hit a moment later. That was more than overload; the drives themselves must have been hit.

He pulled himself together, gritting his teeth with lingering pain, and tried to regain control. The blast had given them a crazy end-over-end spin, and they were headed for the collector base at devastating speed. Without the mass effect field the thrusters didn't have the raw power he needed to change their course, but he could control it. He had to, or they'd hit the collector base nose-first. The Normandy's air-frame wouldn't survive that kind of impact... and neither would they.

Rhi's hand on his shoulder reminded him that there were other people in the cockpit.

"Mass effect field generators are offline," he explained. "EDI, give me something!"

"Generators are un-responsive."

"I know!" His breath seemed to come slowly, his fingers hovering over the display, waiting for the right moment in the Normandy's spin so that the thrusters would have maximum effect, judging their power against the ship's inertia. Now. He held onto the thruster burn, hoping he hadn't waited too long.

Sweat was leaking from under his cap, his ribs ached, and Shepard's hand was solid on his shoulder, but all he saw was the vector data, their death drawn in wire frame on his screens. The collector base was almost on them.

Slowly, the thrusters were halting the Normandy's wild yaw rotation.

"All hands, brace for impact." EDI's impassive voice made it seem unreal.

He brought the Normandy out of the spin with bare meters to spare; her nose pointed along the curve of the massive base, racing across the uneven surface instead of smashing against it, their speed still far, far too high for theirproximity.

Shapes loomed ahead of them; substructures of the base or random space trash it had accumulated over the centuries, he couldn't tell. At this speed they were deadly, and the Normandy's sluggish response was a far cry from the norm for his beautiful ship.

*If I can touch us down gently, use the ablative armor to kill our speed* – The Normandy slewed sideways, almost hitting an outcropping. She was suddenly agile again, and the burn he'd asked for was too much. "We're in the edge of their envelope!" Without their own controlled mass field to cushion them, they were at the mercy of the fluctuations generated by the collector base.

Ahead of them a broad ridge grew out of the surface of the station, coming up too fast to avoid. He rolled the Normandy to port, raising her starboard wing so she'd skim the obstacle instead. Now she was heavy under his hands again; the base's artificial gravity was asserting itself, pulling them down the side of the base towards the ridge. With the base's art grav defining up and down, the ridge had become a ledge. The Normandy was fighting to stay above it – and losing.

"Brace for impact," he repeated EDI's order. "There's nothing I can –"

Their port wing hit first. They felt it as a rumbling shudder, metal straining against metal, without
the shriek it would have made in atmo. He was pushed into the harness again and the pain left him gasping, like it was him that was being dragged along the rough surface of collector base, his armor boiling away into space. My wings.

When the starboard side jarred down it was almost a relief; they were shedding speed rapidly now, friction doing what he'd been unable to manage. A sudden lurch threw him against the arm of the chair despite the harness, followed by another bright, sickening pain. He bit his lip hard enough to draw blood, swallowing his hurt, clutching desperately at the chair so he wouldn't move again.

When he regained awareness, they'd stopped.

"Joker." Rhi was pulling herself off the floor, stooping at his side, easing the harness off. Her fingers were nimble despite the armored gauntlets. He watched her hands move for a moment before her words made sense of themselves. "Are you going to be okay?"

She looked worried. That wasn't right. Have to say something. "Think I broke another rib." He grimaced. "Or a few."

She pulled the last of the straps off and helped him straighten up. It was so strange, watching her try to be gentle in a hard suit. "Can you –"

"I'll be fine," he cut her off. I have to see this out. "Gimme five minutes and a nerve blocker. If Miranda can help me with an injection…" he paled at the thought of the long walk to the med bay. How the hell am I going to help if I can't even get to the crew deck? No. One thing at a time.

Miranda was already out of her seat and on her way out of the cockpit. "Stay here. I'll bring back – what? Site-specific?"

"Yeah. Ribs." He grinned weakly. "Short needle."

Rhi crouched next to Joker while she paged the crew, one hand on his knee. For one sickening moment she'd been worried, but a few broken ribs weren't so bad. Miserable, but not nearly as dangerous as it could've been.

We landed right-way up, for one thing. The collector's gravity field seemed to pull down the shaft of the cylinder; if they'd landed on its curve instead of rolling up onto the ridge, she'd be sitting on the bulkhead right now. Small mercies.

When they lost their own gravity she'd locked her boots to the floor, then quickly thought better of it. Getting jerked around while her feet stayed in place was a good way to tear something. Instead she'd made do with one of the emergency straps as a loose tether, counting on her armor and its kinetic dampeners to protect her from impacts in the suddenly dangerous ship.

The members of the squad all confirmed their status; Joker was the only one without armor, and his the only real injury. She gave them fifteen minutes to do what they could for the Normandy before they met her in the briefing room. Fifteen minutes to think of what they were going to do next.

The shock of their crash hadn't entirely taken away her joy at watching Joker take down the collector ship; he'd needed that. If they managed nothing else, they'd done that much – they'd killed the ship that had destroyed the SR1. And we'll manage the rest, damn it.

Miranda returned with supplies and leaned over to help Joker, pulling up the edge of his shirt to
reveal a darkening bruise. Shepard glanced back at them, then returned her attention to the data. EDI was pulling from the collector base. The scanners hadn't been affected, and EDI was building a wire-frame model of the base they rested on before her eyes – the bare essentials on which she had to build her plan.

Joker seemed to relax all at once; whatever Miranda had given him must've worked. He pulled himself up and peered at the wire-frame. One hand gently stroked the little image of the Normandy.

Shepard suspected that if Miranda hadn't been there, the gesture would have been for her, instead. Miranda caught his worry for the ship, if none of the rest of it. "We all knew this would probably be a one-way trip."

Shepard shot her a reproving look. "I'll do whatever it takes to stop the collectors, but I plan to live to tell about it."

Joker snorted. "I'm glad you're in charge."

She winked at him. "Time to go be in charge, then. Stay out here and let that stuff sink in. You can follow on the comm."

His "Knock 'em dead, Shepard" followed her down the gangway to the briefing room.

When she entered the squad was already crowded around the briefing room table, full of adrenaline and waiting for direction. EDI projected the wire-frame of the collector base – or at least, the parts detectable by the Normandy's sensor array.

Shepard gestured at the projection. "The collector ship is – wait – was," she waited for the cheers to die down, "built with approximate radial symmetry around a huge central hollow. EDI's scans show the base is at least superficially similar. It follows that the most important thing – the shit they care about – is in the middle." She tapped the table. "If we find our crew, we're going to find them in there." She tried not to think about the acre on acre of body pods that had lined the collector ship, or how small that behemoth of a vessel had looked next to the base itself. EDI was already scanning for known radio signals and energy signatures; if the crew were still in uniform – and if any of that uniform still worked, inside the collector pods – they'd find them.

"If we don't find them?" Jacob asked.

"Then we'll keep looking, and kill some more collectors on the way." She raised an eyebrow. "No one minds killing a few extra collectors, right?"

"Ha! Let me at 'em!"

She grinned. I can always count on Grunt to bring the enthusiasm about killing things.

"We're lucky. There are ports into the base near here. Catch is, that central hollow is blocked off by security doors – no matter where we go in. EDI can't tell from here, but chances are they lock on the other side, or somewhere else entirely. There is a duct here –" she pointed, "that looks like it could put someone right on the other side. If that someone was small."

"You called?" Kasumi said.

"Bingo. If anyone can get through ancient alien security, it's you." And none of the rest of us could fit in the damn pipe. "Use your omnitool to link to EDI if you can't bring it down quickly; this is
"Will do, Shep." Kasumi grinned. "I'd hate for all my time with collector algorithms to go to waste. The things I brought back from their ship were so enlightening."

As far as Shepard had known, Kasumi hadn't even been on the collector ship – but what her master thief got up to in her spare time wasn't important now. Shepard shoved it aside. "We need to split their attention; the person trapped in the duct is a target. I'll take a small team and use this passage – it follows the duct, near enough, in case of emergencies. This one," she pointed to a bigger gap in the wire frame nearer the Normandy, "is where I want the rest of you. We'll meet in the middle."

"You'll need someone in command of the second team," Miranda said, "Someone with leadership experience."

She'll offer herself, and Jack will rip her a new one. Rhi didn't have time for it. "Garrus will lead the fire team." He'd been her choice to begin with.

"Of course, Shepard." He cocked his head sideways and blinked – the turian version of a joking wink, as far as she could tell. "Who're you leaving me with?"

Zaeed chuckled.

"I'll take Miranda and Mordin, for now. We can plan our next step once we get past those doors. Joker will stay here – he and EDI are going to figure out what it'll take to get the Normandy in the sky again." She looked at the circle of faces, armored and eager. "We ready?"

"Then let's do this."

Shepard was the first to jump down onto the surface, blue armor shining in the strange ruddy light. Joker opened the shutters to watch her start to scale the exterior of the station, half-climbing, half-scrambling, Miranda and Mordin following in her wake. The second team was still cycling out the airlock.

He looked out the other direction, over the debris field and to the stars beyond, and knew why she didn't look back. He remembered the sudden spike of the heart-rate monitor.

She'll be okay, he told himself. She's not going to find anything inside this place that's worse for her than that.

Chapter End Notes

It turns out that trying to figure out reasonable ship-to-ship combat with space-magic physics is a bit tricky; at one point I stooped to flying double-A batteries around my desk. (Pew pew pew noises obligatory).

We're fast approaching the end (and many thanks to readers who've stuck with me for over a year). I've had a few people ask if I'll continue aStSHB into ME3. No - it's good for stories to have ends.

I'm going to try my damndest to write a sequel, though. :P
I finally had to admit that I have enough story in my head that it'll torment me until/unless I write it down, and there are parts of ME3 that just call out to be reworked. BUT - I seriously need a break to get my ducks in a row, and I'm afraid the fandom may have drifted off to greener pastures before I manage anything substantial. SO: I will post a prologue/teaser for the As-Yet-Unnamed sequel before I post the epilogue of aStSHB, and then take a bit of a posting vacation. Anyone interested can bookmark the teaser, and at some unspecified point in the future I will once again emerge to spew chapters at you.
Chapter 39

Right. Get the ship running. The Normandy was built with redundant systems; she could take a beating and keep going, as long as they had time to work around the problem.

"Damage report, EDI. Is there anything I need to physically fix, or can we rig work-arounds with software?" Not that I know how to physically fix much. He should have asked if Shepard could spare Tali. She needed everyone she had with her, he was sure – but getting out safely wouldn't do much good if they couldn't leave.

"Life support systems are green. The hanger bay is depressurized –"

"No shit. There's a great big hole in it."

"Three, actually. The ablative armor —"

"—Ablated. That's what it does. Skip the checklist; just tell me the worst problems."

"That is difficult. There are errors whose cause I cannot ascertain."

Shit. "What do you mean?"

"I have access to all of the Normandy's internal monitoring systems, but I am still software. Where there is no camera or detection circuit, I rely on inference."

He sighed. "You need me to crawl somewhere, don't you?"

"It would be quicker if you walk, Jeff."

He rolled his eyes and started for the elevator. "Where'm I going?"

Her voice kept pace with him, coming out of different speakers. "Engineering. The first anomaly is in the coolant flow-rate on the port-side vent. It may indicate structural damage. Visual analysis is needed to determine if it presents danger in flight. Enter via the port access hatch. Describe any anomalies you find."

"Describe?" He had a vision of himself and EDI arguing definitions on a non-functional Normandy when Shepard arrived, the entirety of the collector species hot on her tail. "That's ridiculous. Hold on." He veered right, towards the armory. "I can't believe we don't have a mobile camera set up for you. I suppose that'd be too damn useful."

"I can instruct you in removing a stationary camera, but I'm afraid –"

"It'd take too long. And I'm going to need all the power in my omnitool if I have to fix anything. Got a better plan." He pulled a helmet out of an armor locker. It was an extra; plain matte grey, straight from the factory.

"We have the technology." He balanced the helmet on his thigh while he fumbled for the switches inside. On his other hand his omnitool shimmered to life. "One second… oops… bingo. Helmet's comm suite is already keyed to the Normandy. You see anything?"

"Yes. A close-range visual of your –"

"Gah, never mind!" He turned the helmet around and carried it by the neck back to the elevator.
"The visual is now upside-down."

"You have an entire room of processors. I'm pretty sure you can flip an image." He stepped from the elevator onto the engineering deck. The port access hatch opened on a narrow utility corridor directly inside the interior pressure hull. Insulated pipes ran the length of it. He held the helmet up so the face-plate looked at the largest. "This the one?"

"Yes. Start at one end and look for physical anomalies."

The close space reeked of hot metal and he had to watch his footing, but the problem wasn't hard to find. A set of mounts holding one of the pipes in place had sheared off the bulkhead, and the pipe sagged alarmingly. Stress lines were already beginning to show on the metal surface.

"The visible damage is commensurate with the variance in the flow data," said the helmet.

"Ah yup, it's a problem." He crouched down to peer at it. The bolts had been sliced clean through by sheer forces, either in the crash or when he'd bumped one of the derelicts in the debris field. *Sorry girl.* He raised a hand to the pipe; it was still warm to the touch. "A little out of my depth here, EDI."

"There is a roughly 70% chance that activating the mass effect generators will cause this conduit to rupture at the point of weakness if not repaired. The conduit must be replaced for long-term use, however welding the broken support should suffice until the Normandy is in safe space again."

"If I knew how to weld, that'd be awesome," he muttered.

---

Kasumi was well into the vent when they encountered the first collectors. Shepard was almost glad to see them; she'd expected them earlier, and the quiet had been eerily reminiscent of the trap on the collector's ship.

She ducked behind a low ridge, thankful for the organic irregularity of the base's construction. Mordin and Miranda followed suit, one on either side.

"Make me a weak spot in their armor. I'll take the fight to them." She couldn't let Kasumi get too far ahead of her. Once the collectors caught on, the thief would be a sitting duck.

She centered herself, pulling power into her chest while Mordin and Miranda softened up her prey. She hurled herself forward just as the flash of Miranda's biotic explosion faded, straight into a huddle of collector drones. The force of her arrival scattered them like bowling pins. In the moment of dilated time she killed the first one before it hit the floor. After that she had to act fast, trusting her armor and her team.

"Shep, there's a barrier! I can't get through from this side, but I can see the mechanism. 10 o'clock, near the exposed section of the vent."

The blockage was twenty meters away, across an open space that just begged for an attack on her flank.

"I don't want to distract you, Shep, but it's getting kinda hot in here."

She was about to start running when she saw a flicker of movement near the vent – another drone, headed straight for the mechanism – and Kasumi.
Shepard grinned. Blue light raced along her shoulders. She crossed the open space in an instant, will focused on her new target. The lifeless body crumpled to the ground, and she mentally thanked it for the transportation. The control panel wasn't so helpful. She could barely tell what was machinery and what was wall.

"Now that's service," Kasumi said. "Okay, I've bypassed the code lock, but there's a physical aspect. Look down and to your left. See the knob? No, the other one. Farther. It looks like a rotten plum. Pull that – it's mechanical, brute strength should do it."

Shepard checked her six; Mordin and Miranda were buying her time. She grabbed the lever and yanked. The gate blocking the vent rose so fast it slammed into its housing.

"Maybe slightly less brute next time," Kasumi suggested.

"I'll keep pace with you. There might be more." The end of the lever had come off in Shepard’s hand. She tossed the broken piece over her shoulder.

"Sounds good." Kasumi vanished behind a bulkhead, slipping through the tiny space like she'd been greased.

Shepard readied her shotgun and ducked down the passage, staying as close as she could. The corridor twisted and turned, covering twice as much ground as the path Kasumi was squeezing through.

"Looks like there's another gate up here."

She started running, surprising a collector as she came around a corner. She hit it with a shotgun blast to the abdomen and didn't stop to see if it was dead. Ahead of her the way widened into another cavernous space. Collectors were landing on it, flying up from the chasm to her right. At the far end she could just make out another control panel.

There were only five drones on the ground, but the whir of chitinous wings promised more.

"Shep, it's getting hot again," Kasumi panted.

Shepard charged, passing the nearer enemies as if they weren't there. Her barriers slammed into a drone in the middle of the room. Its exoskeleton gave a sickly crunch. She whirled back the way she'd come and shot another in the back just as Mordin and Miranda appeared in the space where she'd been, running for all they were worth.

A drone alighted on the ledge and started to glow. *Harbinger*. Once the drone was completely possessed, it'd be tougher to kill. *And it'll probably talk.*

"Shepard," Miranda panted, "We can't cover you when you get that far ahead!"

"So move your asses!" The longer they waited, the more collectors would arrive. Holding position was death.

She unleashed her gathered power and hurled herself towards the glowing drone. The impact pushed it backwards off the ledge. Caught midway between being its own creature and the puppet of Harbinger, it couldn't make its wings work. The body plummeted into the chasm, a faint orange glow against the darkness.

She turned from the pit to find her next target. "Full speed ahead, motherfuckers."
"I was top of my class in flight school. No one ever mentioned plumbing. Should've taken night classes – ow!" Joker straightened up too fast and whacked the back of his head on a pipe. Not the pipe he was working on, small mercy; it probably would have exploded under the strain and drowned him in coolant. *Shit, that would be an embarrassing way to die. Almost as embarrassing as frying yourself on a welder you don't know how to use.*

They'd found and evaluated – well, he found and EDI evaluated – the physical damage to the ship. EDI's priority list lead him right back to the first access shaft and the damaged pipe. They couldn't be sure of the engines until they tested them, and they couldn't do that if the coolant system flooded engineering.

He looked at the diagram on his omnitool again. *It can't be that hard. Donnelly can do it.*

The access way had seemed spacious enough when he'd looked the first time, but now, juggling a welder, hand light, jack, and EDI's helmet, it felt tiny. It was impossible to move without bumping things. He'd already hit his injured side once; it should have been agony, but with the nerve-blocker induced numbness it only made him feel queasy. He'd pay for it later. *Just as long as there is a later. Rhi promised there'd be a later.*

"I don't like being down here," he grumbled as he worked. "I can't tell what's going on with Rh – with the ground team." *Which is everybody except me, now.*

"I will update you on any events of strategic importance, Jeff. All team-members are currently healthy. If you wish for direct contact, you may of course use this helmet's radio." A light near the face-plate blinked. "Ah, a coincidence. Here."

"Joker," Shepard's voice issued from the spot EDI's had a moment before. "Kasumi's almost through. My stalker's back – Harbinger – but so far, so good. How's the *Normandy*? Any complications?"

"Haven't had any company. Have to fix a few things before I can get a time estimate on restoring the generators, but there's nothing we can't deal with, babe." There was no one but EDI to hear the endearment, and it made him smile.

"'Course there isn't. Shepard out." Judging from Rhi's tone it had made her smile, too.

"Please ask any time you wish to speak with the commander, Jeff. I would not like worry to impair your usual efficiency."

His smile turned into a grimace. "Okay, that's just kinda not right."

"What is 'not right'?"

"Talking to a helmet that's you and then Shepard. And then you. Freaky."

"The helmet is merely serving as a communication device, Jeff – a radio. Surely that is not 'freaky.'"

"Yeah, but it's head shaped, and – just leave it, okay, EDI? Most weird-ass creepy things are *not* logic things." He squeezed back under the pipe, around the jack that wedged everything in place, and fired up the welder. Rhi had her targets. He had his.

—
Garrus's squad rejoined Shepard's on the other side of the first set of doors, slipping through the narrow opening with collectors hot on their tail. Kasumi was breathless and flushed when they pulled her out of the vent.

The security systems that had almost kept them out bought them a moment of peace. They stood on another broad ledge. In front of them an empty column yawned above and below. The space was lined with pods. How many held human bodies? And how are we ever going to find our own?

"Shepard," Miranda said, "You need to look at this."

"Grunt, Zaeed – watch the doors." One of the collectors' body-pods stood on-end next to Miranda. The surface was murky, but as Shepard drew nearer she could make out the human form within; a young woman wearing practical work-a-day clothes.

"One of the colonists? Poor kid."

Miranda nodded sadly. "We were too late for her before we ever came to Horizon. For all we know she's been in this case since Ferris Fields. Or Freedom's Progress."

"Mmm." Shepard frowned. The colonist must've been in there at least a month, but the body was perfectly preserved. The nerve-toxin bearing seeker swarms must have gotten her; there was no sign of injury or struggle. The girl looked like she could wake at any moment.

Wait. Did she just move?

"Miranda! Mordin! Get this open!"

Rhi ran her fingers over the case, trying to find a catch. The woman inside started to twitch in earnest, like a dreamer coming out of a troubled sleep. The pod might have been carved of one piece; she couldn't find anything that looked like an opening. Miranda and Mordin worked frantically at its other side, but to no more effect.

We'll get you out. Shepard looked in the front again, hoping to see a seam from the inside. A dark sheen was creeping over the woman's pale skin. "Mordin! What's happening?"

"Not chemical." Mordin was jabbing furiously at his omnitool. "Cyber-tech. Purpose unknown. Suspect speed of the essence!"

The film covered the woman's face, now, thickening in the creases of her skin and turning darker. No. Eating her! It was blood that made it that red.

Shepard raised the butt of her shotgun, intending to slam it into the clear pane, but she was too late. The young woman dissolved before her eyes.

Miranda met her gaze, porcelain skin looking greenish behind her faceplate.

"EDI!" Shepard clenched her jaw and turned from the unsettling sight. "The missing crew are top priority. What do you have on their location?"

"There is a faint signal which I believe to be Daniels' suit radio," EDI answered. "I am attempting to pinpoint the location, but the bulk of the collector base is creating interference."

"Got it." Shepard shouted the team out of their shock: "Tali, Samara, left ten meters. Kasumi, Thane, right ten. Give EDI access to your omnitools." Maybe she can triangulate that signal. Come on, EDI.

The seconds dragged while EDI gathered data. Mordin poked at the body-pod; the rest of the
squad looked anywhere else.

"I have pinpointed the signal. Twenty meters on my bearing."

An indicator light flashed in Shepard's HUD. She followed it to where a narrow shelf skirted the edge of the chasm. It'd be single file for the first fifteen meters – the perfect place for an attack.

"Garrus, Legion – stay here and cover us. Everyone else, with me."

"Shepard," EDI spoke on a private channel, "it is quite possible that the collectors’ constructs only affect organics. The survival of the radio does not indicate the survival of the bearer."

She’d been thinking the same thing. "I know, EDI, but we’re not giving up until I know for damn sure. Keep it quiet." More pods lined the wall to her right. She didn’t let herself look at their occupants.

There was a whir of wings from below. Legion's rifle boomed, and the collector fell before it could reach them. Garrus took another, but more were coming, and her people were pressed between the pods and a long drop.

"Hug the wall!" Shepard threw a shock wave into the approaching hostiles. It flung them back, buying time for her team. The snipers picked the staggered collectors off.

Three meters farther on the path widened. An aperture in the wall lead to a more defensible chamber – and the signal EDI was tracking. Shepard ducked into the room, checking left and right for further danger. It was empty except for the body pods, lining the perimeter and stretching in ranks up towards a distant ceiling. My crew.

"Thane, Zaeed – hold that door. Garrus, Legion, wait until everyone’s off the ledge then get over here."

The first pod was vacant, as was the second, but the third’s dusky surface revealed the black and white of a Cerberus uniform. "Mordin! How do we get them out?"

"No time for finesse. Suggest knives and/or brute force."

She had her switchblade out before he'd finished. She stabbed into the pod nearest her, and the transparent membrane cracked under the sharp steel. She pulled the shards away from the body within, and helped a blinking Matthews into the light.

The rest of the team was running from pod to pod, checking for their people, but they’d only found a few.

"Shepard! Up here!" Kasumi was halfway up the wall, climbing among the cases.

"Got it! Get back." She caught the case in a biotic field and tugged it down off the wall. Tali appeared at her side, nimble fingers worked over the edges. When the cover slid away Donnelly fell into the quarian's arms. The engineer looked woozily at Tali's face-plate, slurred "my hero," and started to fall to the ground.

Tali helped him to sit, and Shepard turned back to the wall, pulling down another case. Around her the others were helping without need for instruction. Samara, Jack, and Jacob's biotics flickered blue along with her own, retrieving the cases that Thane and Kasumi found on the walls. Grunt was opening pods with his forehead, which had to be terrifying to wake up to. Mordin and Miranda were checking for signs of injury.
Zaeed lifted Mercer bodily out of a case; the young relief pilot clung to his neck for dear life. The brawny merc untangled her fingers with surprising gentleness and set her on the floor with the others. Shepard freed Chakwas herself, slipping an arm under the older woman's shoulders before she could fall.

"Hang in there, doc. You're almost home."

The group of survivors huddled on the floor grew bigger; Shepard saw Patel's dark hair and Chambers' red, holding each other tightly. Daniels and Donnelly, Rolston and Hotchkins. Chakwas, refusing to let herself collapse with the others, even though she had to lean on Zaeed.

Shepard did a quick head-count.

Then she counted again, and once more, hardly believing it.

Everyone. They'd found everyone.

Relief added spring to her step, a buoyant, floating feeling. She keyed the private channel.

"Joker," she said, "we've got them." Her eyes were wet. "We've got them all." She swallowed around the lump in her throat. "What'd'ya think, babe? You ready for a full ship again?"

It took him a moment to respond, and his voice caught on the words. "Better send 'em on home. But tell 'em to wipe their feet first."

She chuckled, heart full. "Will do." The recovered crew huddled together on the ground, leaning on each other for support. "They're not going to be much help for a while, I'm afraid."

"Eh, they're just decorative anyway." His voice was gruff, a casual facade over a relief as deep as her own. "And you can tell Donnelly I said that. Any chance you can spare Tali? I'm trying, but it's like paint-by-numbers. I don't know what the hell I'm doing with engines."

"Sure thing."

She turned to the waiting crowd, giving Chambers a hand up, gently slapping Matthews shoulder, folding Mercer into a hug. Everyone's alive.

She stepped back to address them all. "I know it hasn't been a pleasant ride, but you need to hang on a bit farther. Doctor Solus and Tali will escort you back to the Normandy. We'll be giving the collectors other things to think about, so they shouldn't worry you much." She smiled at them proudly. My people. "It's good to see you again."

EDI tracked the progress of the returning crew, and Joker was near the airlock to greet them. He heaved a sigh of relief when the first bunch set foot in the Normandy proper. He wouldn't believe they were safe until they were all back in friendly space, but it was a start.

Chakwas was in the first group aboard, and her first move was to hug him – a sentiment he returned whole-heartedly, though he had to be a bit ginger about the actual gesture.

"Missed you, doc. Can't seem to keep myself in one piece without you around."

"Oh, no, what –"

"Nothing that won't keep. Looks like you'll have your hands full for a while."
The returning crew looked awful – sick and shaken, eyes bleary and steps uncertain. Chakwas was no better off, but she put a good face on it. "I suppose I can be patient for my favorite patient."

"You know it." He maneuvered the doctor between himself and Kelly Chambers. She'd just stepped out of the airlock, and it looked like she was in a hugging mood, too. Some things he wasn't up to dealing with.

Tali and Mordin were last aboard. Tali clutched a spot on her arm.

"You all right? You have any trouble?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Mordin said. "Tali sustained small injury. Lucky. Environment of collector base hostile to all non-collector life; unlikely to sustain bacteria capable of attacking quarian physiology."

Joker turned to Tali in concern.

"Just a scratch," She said. "Don't worry, I'm ready to work on the engines." She lifted her hand to show a neat seal already in place on her environment suit. "Speaking of engines, you haven't done anything awful to them, have you?"

Joker gave Tali a run-down of what they'd done so far. Ken and Gabby joined them, pale but determined.

"I'd rather work than think, if it's all the same to you," Ken said. He was leaning heavily on Gabby; the enforced immobility hadn't helped his limp.

"Only you would think those were mutually exclusive," Gabby shot back. She shifted her shoulders, resettling his arm. "Meet you engineering, Tali. We'll see how much good Kenneth can do sitting on his ass."

The two engineers started towards the elevator, grumbling at each other. The rest of the crew slowly filtered down towards the crew deck and the med bay, herded by Mordin and a rather woozy Chakwas. Tali left last, already poking at her omni-tool.

Joker sank into his own chair, relieved to know that the Normandy's mechanical systems were finally in more capable hands than his own, and radioed Shepard.

There was no response, only a burst of static on the line. "Garrus, this is the Normandy. Come in."

"Garrus here." A gunshot sounded, close to the radio. "Did the crew make it back?"

"Everyone's here. I can't raise Shepard."

"Miranda'll give you a sit-rep. I've got my hands full."

"Mr. Moreau, glad to hear the crew's back," Miranda's no-nonsense voice was a relief. "The main path was blocked. Shepard took a small team through an alternate route. The area she's in is full of the seeker bugs we encountered at Horizon – the swarms are so dense they cut off radio contact. Can you or EDI pinpoint their location?"

The radio signal wasn't coming through, but the simpler ping from the suits' life support systems was still making it. "Vital signs look good. Jack's having a tough time of it. I don't have more than respiration, temp, and heart rate, though. They're more than half way to you."
"Good, we're – uuff." Miranda's response was cut short by a sick grunt.

"You okay?"

"Fine." She was panting. "That's what armor is for. We've been waiting at the doors for ten minutes, and we've got enemies coming in from every side."

The noise was deafening. Billions of wings made a background buzz so loud they had to turn up their radios. Legion's sniper rifle boomed. Grunt roared. Jack, standing in the middle maintaining the biotic barrier that kept the seeker swarms at bay, cursed.

Swarms of seekers, each almost as large as Shepard's hand, hit the barrier like a hail storm.

Fighting within the confines of the barrier was hard; they had to let the enemy come to them instead of choosing their ground. Shepard and Grunt moved at Jack's pace, stopping only when the collectors threatened to overwhelm them. Legion paced them in the shadows, beyond the hemisphere of safety, bugs pinging off the metal platform.

Husks were crawling out of nowhere, some of them glowing red at the joints, a sure sign they'd been booby trapped. Suicide husks moved like a normal zombie until you took 'em down, and then they exploded, taking you with it.

_Have to keep them away from Jack._ If the barrier went down, they were all done for.

Shepard had been at the leading edge of the bubble, clearing their path. Now she fell back. Jack's position was too vulnerable; the collectors could fly in from overhead, and the husks seemed to squeeze out of spaces human bodies shouldn't have been able to fit. She couldn't defend Jack if she couldn't see her.

"Shepard!" Jack said as she passed. Jack was tiring; she'd never have let the note of alarm into her voice otherwise.

"Just watching your ass," Shepard reassured her. She checked her six again; clear for now.

"Bullshit," Jack panted, "I know damn well whose ass you like to watch, and it ain't mine."

Shepard snorted and sent a husk flying.

Grunt shot them a quizzical look. Shepard bellowed at him to keep his eye on the enemy. Jack chuckled weakly. "You'll understand when you're older, kid."

"With any luck I won't be the one explaining," Shepard muttered. Jack laughed again and the barrier gleamed a little brighter.

"Shepard, behind you!" Grunt roared.

She gathered biotic energy as she turned and sent it cascading out blindly behind her. Two husks flew backward into the darkness.

"Thanks." The barrier edged forward as Jack moved, and she walked backward, an eye on the shadows.

"I can see the exit," Jack panted. "Hurry, Shepard!"
Shepard risked a glance over her shoulder. More husks were closing in behind them, but the hatch and safety were so very, very close. A shotgun blast to the gut leveled the one nearest her. "As fast as you want, Jack!"

She guarded the rear while Grunt cleared the front, so close to the barrier that it tingled against her nerves and distorted her vision. On the other side seeker bugs flung themselves at her, bouncing off the barrier bare inches from her armor.

"FUCK!"

Shepard whirled. A husk had crept up their flank and grabbed hold of Jack's ankle, pulling her off balance. Jack couldn't catch herself; she crashed to the ground, hands still outspread above her. She didn't let the field so much as flicker. "SHEPARD!"

Rhi flung herself at the crawling husk. Old flesh and implanted cybernetics gave under her weight with a nauseating squish-crunch. She grabbed the monster's chin and skull and twisted until the spine snapped. When she released her grip the head almost came off.

Another wave of collectors was coming in behind them. Jack couldn't push herself up while maintaining the field. No time. "Grunt, get Jack! WE NEED TO MOVE!"

The young krogan turned from the collector he'd just head-butted into submission, flung Jack over his shoulder, and bolted for the door. Shepard followed, running down the slope ahead of husks and bullets alike. Legion was ahead of them, first to the door, providing cover fire.

As they crossed the threshold Jack roared. The barrier that had protected them surged outwards, flinging the enemy clear of the closing hatch. Then she collapsed against Grunt's back, spent.


"Roger." Garrus's vid showed a mess of collector corpses. "Everyone fall back! The doors are opening!"

There was a rattle of fire and a roar from Grunt, and Garrus’s team retreated beyond the now open doors. Joker thumbed through several vid feeds in succession; the collectors fought until the last second, but the doors closed with the enemy safely on the other side.

"Joker, did everyone make it back?" It was good to hear Shepard's voice again.

"Yes, Commander. Safe and sound. Tali's down in the Normandy's guts – she'll be ready to fly again as soon as you make it outta there."

"Soon, Joker. This is the last push. EDI says these transport platforms oughta take us right to the heart. We'll overload the main systems and get the hell out."

He checked the scans for her area. "You have hostiles massing on the other side of those doors. Won't be long until they bust through."

"Figured as much."

She closed the private channel and turned to address the assembled team. "There are a bunch of angry collectors doing their damnedest to get through those doors. Most of you are going to stay
Tali radioed up from engineering, and he muted the audio from the ground team while he answered her question. He left the vid feed up: it was easy enough to see what was going on. Shepard was telling them that they were hot shit, the monsters that collectors told baby collectors about to scare them into eating their collector veggies, more than a match for any ancient bio-engineered warrior races that happened to be lying around.

And they'd believe her.

This was why the Illusive Man had spent two billion credits to bring her back. Not the biotics, or the combat reflexes, or whatever freaky Special Forces tricks she’d picked up in N7 training. She’d made a team out of a bunch of self-interested type-As; kept Miranda and Jack from killing each other, Grunt from killing everything that moved, Garrus from killing himself and Thane from killing – *hell, it could be anyone*. Then she dragged them to the center of the galaxy, stuck them in the middle of a hostile force, and told them they were going to kick ass – and they believed her.

He’d always been too cynical to be taken in by all the gung-ho bullshit about heroes and natural leaders. They believed her because she believed herself; they believed in the image, in the coolly competent warrior. They didn’t know she doubted more than she let on, and that she’d been a wreck a few months ago.

He knew too much to be taken in by it, but it worked on him anyway.

This amazing woman had come back from the dead fighting mad, let him see her weak spots, laughed with him. He needed her to make it back so badly that his heart clenched in his chest.

He finished the test Tali had asked for and turned the audio back on.

Rhi had crouched down, bringing herself closer to eye-level with the rest. She was grinning, now; that fierce, feral smile that welcomed all challengers. The fight ahead was *fun*, and she was generously letting the rest of the team in on it.

"We're here to defeat an enemy strong enough to threaten entire cultures; entire species. And to face that huge threat, we came through that relay with fifteen people." She lowered her voice, and all the little movements of the team stopped as they strained to hear.

"We came through the relay with fifteen people. And we're going to kick their fucking asses."

The squad yelled agreement as one voice.

*I never told you how amazing you are. You're deadly and beautiful and funny and quite possibly insane, and god, I love you. Come back in one piece.*
The platform moved away into the immense cavern, and Shepard took one last – *no, not last, we won't let it be last* – look at her team.

Jack, exhausted from holding the protective barrier through the storm of seekers but still grimly determined, was devouring one of Shepard's ration bars. Zaeed stood at her side, looking nonchalant but, Shepard was fairly certain, actually there in case fatigue got the best of Jack and she started to fall over. Grunt was strutting, on edge but determined not to show it. Legion was carefully picking mangled seeker corpses out of their chassis. Jacob and Kasumi were talking. Samara was a quiet spot in the turmoil, alert eyes looking for the foe. Garrus surveyed them all.

*Ready. They're ready.*

Beside her, Miranda checked her pistol. "One question, Shepard."

"Yes?"

"*Fifteen* people?"

"Yup."

Miranda started to list off names, but Shepard interrupted her. "EDI, you make it through the relay okay?"

"Obviously, Shepard."

"There you go. Fifteen. I can count." Over Miranda's shoulder she saw collectors flying in. "Incoming, 10 o'clock!"

It was like the fight on the collector ship, months ago, but this time they were prepared. Shepard silently thanked Thane and Garrus for the awkward lessons with the sniper rifle. She still wasn't very good, but for this, she didn't need to be. All they needed was range. The collectors could fly, but they weren't fast, and (as she'd observed the first time she knocked one out of the air with a biotic blast) they weren't very maneuverable. They relied on the floating platforms for speedier transport – and EDI had hacked the one they were using to go fast indeed.

Other platforms came at them in waves, each carrying a handful of armed collector drones. Most of the enemy never reached them, picked off at long range by sniper fire or slammed off their conveyance with well-placed biotic shoves. Caught off balance, the collectors fell rather than flew, plummeting to the unseen floor far below.

*What do they use all this space for?* The central chamber was so massive their destination was obscured by the distance, and she needed a sniper scope to see where they'd come from. The entire inside of the station was hollow, and they floated through the middle of it, alone on a tiny island – with only the occasional visiting collector.

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Joker had Shepard's audio in one ear and a line to engineering in the other. He'd turned off the open
channel with Garrus when the collectors breached the doors. Once the rearguard had engaged the enemy, the constant bark of orders and shouted alerts had become too distracting. Shepard's team was quieter; he could keep an ear out for danger while he helped Tali troubleshoot.

"We must be close; the tubes are all starting to converge. EDI, can you tell us anything?" There must have been a lull in the fighting, or Rhi wouldn't have bothered with little things like figuring out where the hell she was going.

"The tubes are feeding into some kind of superstructure. It is emitting both organic and inorganic energy signatures. Given these readings, it must be massive. The only recorded construct to emit such dual signatures… is a reaper."

"You sure about that, EDI?" Joker asked.

"I do not have enough information for certainty, Jeff. It is merely a hypothesis which fits the observed data." EDI's hologram flashed. "The platform bearing Shepard has almost reached its destination; the commander will be able to provide further visual confirmation."

"Yup, almost there. Big old control panel. Platform's just docking, and…" Her sentence trailed off.

"Commander?" When she didn't answer immediately, he tried "Rhi?"

"Jeff." Her voice had an undercurrent of panic. "Do you see what I'm seeing?"

He'd been too busy with his own tasks to watch her vid feed. He tapped the diagnostic he was working on closed.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," Shepard muttered.

The vid finally caught up with his request, and Joker's mouth dropped open.

"Holy shit."

"I probably don't want to know.

And it had been made to look human.

Arcs of metal swept around to form a rib cage he could have piloted the shuttle through. A spine snaked downwards, unsupported by flesh, and was lost in the dimness. A gigantic skull lolled forward on vertebrae longer than he was tall. The tubes the team had been following since they'd found what remained of the colonists fed down into the reaper, combining into a few massive conduits that vanished within the mess of tubes and metal that made up its arms. Transparent sections revealed a swirling liquid that glowed a sullen orange.

"EDI, what are those tubes?"

"I believe they are feeding the remains of the colonists into the reaper."

I definitely didn't want to know.

"Kind of pinkish," Joker agreed. Funny how talking about straight-up gore was less terrifying than thinking about the monstrosity on the screen.

"Negative. The tubes are not carrying an undifferentiated liquid – they are providing a conduit for the movement of an immense number of small robots; the same robots which 'processed' the colonists. I do not have enough data to be sure, but it is logical to assume that the robots are conveying different cell types to specific areas for specific purposes."

"That's logical?" Shepard spoke for all of them.

"If the collectors merely wanted to render humans into paste, there are easier methods of doing so."

Right.

"The tubes take the essence of the colonists into the reaper. From there –"

"Our essence isn't coded into our DNA," Shepard argued.

"I am sorry, Shepard. I intended to put forth a theory, not start a nature versus nurture debate."

For once Joker found himself agreeing with EDI over Shepard. Rhi had a good point, but now was not the time for it. Blow the place and get out, babe.

Rhi was nothing if not tenacious, though. "It's not versus, it's both."

"Maybe the reapers don't know that," Miranda suggested.

"Okay, whatever," Joker said. "They're injecting the colonists into the reaper. What does it do with human soup? It's a machine!" He grimaced. "We're not even an efficient fuel source."

"It is partially a machine," EDI corrected. "We have known for some time that reapers are made up of both organic and synthetic components; the balance and function of their components is unknown. Little of the organic remains of Sovereign survived its destruction and a full-scale scientific investigation was never mounted. However, organic cells can pass chemical and electrical signals. It is not outside the realm of possibility for those signals to play a part in a 'machine.'"

"But… why?" Miranda asked. "Why is there a reaper? Why are they feeding it humans? And why the hell does it look like a human?"

"Speak for yourself," Joker muttered. "Doesn't look like me. More like a nightmare skeleton. I'm pretty sure I don't have armored plates on my chest like that."

"Maybe you should," Miranda shot back. "You'd have a few less broken ribs right now. EDI, can you answer me?"

EDI's hologram pulsed thoughtfully. "We may be observing the early stage of a reaper's life cycle."

*Holy shit. It's a reaper-fetus. The collector base is pregnant?*

He hadn't meant to say it aloud, but Shepard chuckled, so he was glad he had. "Good thing we're here to abort it, then. Any idea why it doesn't look like the others? I have a hard time believing we're just *that* pretty. Sovereign and the wreck were both kind of, uh, *squid."

"Cuttlefish," Miranda corrected quietly.
"Perhaps the reaper's shape is based upon the species used to create it," EDI suggested.

"And perhaps they just like to fuck with us."

"I believe the human phrase is 'two birds with one stone'," Thane said.

"As to 'why is there a reaper'; the reapers are known to use organic species as tools – observe the keepers on the Citadel. They may require servant species – in this case the collectors – to provide the labor."

"And we provide the raw materials." Shepard said. "Oh well. Ours not to reason why. Ours just to kill the fucker."

"I don't think that's quite how that goes," Miranda said wryly.

"Yeah, well, I've done the dying bit. I don't recommend it. EDI, show me how to overload the station's core. The reaper can blow with everything else."

"I will need a moment to evaluate the system controls. If I may link through your omnitool?"

*They might not have a moment.* Blips were appearing on the scans at an alarming rate.

"Commander," Joker said, "You've got collectors incoming, and the energy readings from the reaper are rising. It may be coming online."

"EDI, what can I shoot to buy us some time?"

"Destroying the large injection tubes should cause the supports to collapse, and the reaper to fall into the chasm."

"Got it." Shepard stepped away from the console and Joker tore his eyes from the vid and back to his own task. This time he left it running. Whatever happened out there, he wanted to know.

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Shepard ducked as the third injection tube shattered, raining glass, metal, and human remains down on her team. She was glad to be relying on the flat recycled air of her suit; she didn't want to know what it smelled like.

The reaper listed, hanging by only one tube, now, but the collectors were fighting fiercely, and there was something different about the platform that was swooping out of the darkness. The collectors atop it looked more heavily armed – and there were more of them. *They took time to mount a proper defense, instead of coming at us piece-meal.*

Near the front one of the warriors glowed: Harbinger. *Crap.* The collectors were more organized when one of their numbers was possessed by the strange entity. Drones under the thing's control became more powerful, gaining some biotic abilities. *And it never shuts up.*

She didn't know what Harbinger was, but she assumed – hoped – it had a corporeal body of its own somewhere. And that 'somewhere' was on the station. And that she was about to blow it up along with everything else.

“SHEPARD!” it bellowed.

*Learn someone else's name, damn it.*

"YOU WILL KNOW PAIN, SHEPARD."
We're acquainted. She popped out of cover to toss a biotic field at the drone, but there must've been dampeners in his armor; it didn't do a thing. The shotgun blast to the head was a bit more effective. The possessed drone rocked back, staggered, and she charged, taking it low below the center of gravity. It toppled, unable to bring its powers to bear. She planted a booted foot on the neck and emptied her shotgun into it until she had to swap the heat-sink.

No sooner did the glow around the corpse die than it had reappeared around another drone.

“Got it, Shepard! Take the reaper!” Miranda wrapped Harbinger's new vessel in gravitational sheer forces and was peppering it with fire from her SMG.

Shepard turned her back on them and sighted on the last injection tube, glad that the eviscerator she carried was a longer-range shotgun than most. The multiple projectiles seemed to be the best way cause structural damage to the tubes.

At the first blast, cracks started to show. It took two more for the tube to shatter; two more slow shots, long seconds while she trusted her team to watch her back. Then the rain of unmentionable confetti again, the shriek of tortured metal, and the reaper was falling. The gunfire around her had stilled, the last of the collectors taken down near the same time.

Shepard ran up to the edge of the platform to watch the reaper fall into the abyss and radioed the rear guard. "Shepard to ground team. Status report!"

"Garrus here. We're holding, but they keep coming. Not sure how much longer we can last."

"Fight clear and head to the Normandy. Joker, prep the engines. I'm gonna overload this place and blow it sky high."

"Roger that, Commander. It'll be good to have you back. Uh, hold on,” Joker's voice held a note of apology, "I've got an incoming signal from the Illusive Man. EDI's patching it through."

"Now is NOT the time for a pleasant little chat, damn it –"

It was too late. The Illusive Man's image was already coalescing above Miranda's omnitool. His slicked hair and expensive suit looked ridiculous next to their bloody and blackened armor. Bastard probably has a drink waiting just off-camera.

"Shepard, you've done the impossible."

"Thanks for the flattery, but can it wait? Some of us are actually working, here." They were surrounded by collector corpses, and more drones could arrive at any moment. She needed to get the drive sabotage done and get going.

EDI flashed instructions on her omnitool. Just have to rig it with enough time for us to get out. Shepard knelt by the control panel and opened the access hatch, pulling out a section of circuitry. The Illusive Bastard could stare at her back for all she cared.

"Wait. I have a better option!" He sounded almost desperate. "A timed radiation pulse would kill the remaining collectors but leave the machinery and technology intact."

"They liquefied people," she growled, "to build a reaper. Even your own people couldn't keep their sanity around a dead reaper. I want no part of that technology."

"Miranda,” he turned to his operative. “Don't let her do this. Our best chance is to use their own resources against them. This base is a gift."
Shepard glanced back over her shoulder. Miranda had been coming around, lately, but she'd always been Cerberus first. *Can Thane and I take her out if she turns on us?*

Miranda shot her an anguished look. Rhi sympathized even as she figured out how best to incapacitate her if it came to it. It was no fun being in the middle.

"I'm... not so sure. Seeing it first-hand..." Miranda shook her head at the hologram. "We watched a colonist – a colonist we were supposed to save – disassembled to build that reaper. Using anything from this base feels like a betrayal."

"You're letting your emotions get in the way of success, Miranda. I'd thought better of you."

Miranda refused to shrink back from his look of reproof, and the Illusive Man turned back to Shepard.

"Shepard, you died fighting for what you believed. I brought you back so you could keep fighting. Some would say that what we did to you was 'going too far,' but look what you've accomplished! I didn't discard you because I knew your value." He shook his head. "Don't be so quick to discard this facility. Think of the potential!"

"Right. Me, Miranda, the collector stronghold – we're all just tools. Greedy, grasping idiot. If she'd had qualms about destroying the base they would have vanished. Whatever the Illusive Man wanted was almost certainly not what she wanted."

*Except for one marine named Shepard being alive.*

*Do I really want that?*

She couldn't *want* when she was dead; she'd been angry when she was brought back. He *had* gone too far; he could have outfitted an army for what it cost to bring her back, and he'd held her resurrection over her head since she'd woken up on the table. *Do this, Shepard. You owe me. Work with me, Shepard. No one else will believe you. Obey me, Shepard. No one else wants you.*

She hadn't died fighting for what she believed; she'd died on a routine patrol, sent to look for the wrong enemy and killed by one she hadn't known existed. She was a zombie freak who *ought* to be dead. Half the people she'd fought for thought she'd gone rogue and faked her death; half thought she was a fake. There was a big hole in her life, two years big, and enough cyber-tech in her body to build a combat drone.

Did she really want to be alive?

There were a whole lotta people depending on her, a whole bunch of aliens she could kill with no regrets, and a snarky pilot waiting on her ship. Waiting for *her.*

*Hell yeah, I want to be alive.*

*So there is one thing the Illusive Man and I agree on. For now. She had a hunch he'd change his mind on the whole Shepard-being-alive thing when she told him he could stick the collector base where the sun didn't shine, primed to explode and everything.*

"The collectors were working directly with the reapers. Our best chance against the reapers is to use their own technology against them. I will do whatever is necessary to help humanity --"

"No. You'll decide what is 'necessary' in order to further your own little piece of humanity, and then explain away the damage with some fast talking bullshit about sacrifice and pragmatism." She
turned from the console. "Listen, you sniveling coward: You can talk about sacrifice when the blood on your hands is yours. All I see is you using people. And if you're willing to use everyone, then who in hell are you really protecting? Yourself. You want every advantage because you're terrified. You think you need a big ol' base to make you feel safe at night? Fuck you. The rest of us will fight and win without it."

"Miranda, do not let Shepard destroy the base!"

Miranda glared at him. "Or what? You'll replace me, next?"

Good girl. Seeing him for what he really is. She could count on Miranda after all.

"Miranda, I ordered you to –"

"Consider this my resignation." Miranda flicked the comm link closed and leaned down beside Shepard, wordlessly passing her one of the charges they'd brought. "In the control circuitry. Should be right there."

They completed the task together and slid the modified panel home. Thane stood look-out; more collectors were arriving, uncoordinated, coming in desperate ones and twos that he picked of with his rifle.

Just as the panel clicked into place, the platform shook. Shepard whirled around.

The reaper was awake and climbing back out of the pit.

The 'eyes' were open, now, pools of burning red-yellow energy. Another spot glowed where its heart should have been. Weapons. They're all weapons.

Energy was gathering within the reaper's heart, becoming a swirling inferno. "DUCK!" They dropped into cover as an uncontrolled energy beam sprayed out, washing the whole platform in fire. The collectors that had been attacking them were fried by their own creation.

The reaper tilted and slid, unable to control its own movements. It didn't matter; the threat radius on the beam weapons was immense, and as long as it was looking even vaguely the right direction a second out of cover could kill them all.

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Down in engineering the generators roared, reforming the mass effect field around the Normandy, readying them to fly at a moment's notice, but Joker's attention was on Shepard.

He watched with his heart in his throat, unable to do anything, afraid to even say anything in case he distracted her. The reaper moved like a drunk, and the footage from Shepard's helmet cam wasn't much better. She was scrambling to get a line on it without exposing herself to fire. The squad's bullets pinged uselessly off the surface of the monster.

Shepard had pulled the heavy cain from her back; the one weapon that might be able to make a difference. She had to stay still while it came to full charge, though, and ever micro-second was more time she was vulnerable.

He half stood out of his chair when she grunted in pain, and almost cried out. But the view stabilized, and she was pulling the trigger. The cain whined, the reaper turned towards her – and the video feed went dead.
Shepard could barely hear; the thunder of the cain in the closed space had been ear-shattering, High above her the reaper thrashed. Flames were shooting out of its eye sockets, secondary explosions going off inside its skull. She thought it might be screaming, but maybe that was the sound of tearing metal, or the ringing of her own ears. The air was full of smoke and fire, the reaper a shadowy shape that swayed overhead, falling, falling, falling –

She came to her senses and rolled out of the way just as one of the hands crashed into the space where she'd been, scrambling to her feet on a platform gone madly awry. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Miranda stumble and start to slide down the sloping surface. Shepard lunged for her, but the reaper fell against the platform in its death throes, throwing her from her feet. They were slid, slipping perilously close the edge. The reaper was sliding off, too, one hand grasping spasmodically at nothing.

Shepard lunged and caught Miranda's arm just as Miranda fell over the edge. Miranda came to a stop with a jerk that nearly tore Shepard's arm from its socket and dangled helplessly, hand clenched in a death grip around Shepard's forearm. Shepard gritted her teeth and clung grimly on.

The reaper gave a final scream and slid off the platform, falling past Miranda and into the depths below. Relieved of the weight, the platform started to right itself. Shepard dug her feet in and heaved, pulling Miranda bodily back to relative safety just before the platform tipped again. The air was filled with dust and debris. The reaper was tearing apart the station from the inside as it burned.

Another platform careening wildly over them, out of control, smashing into the ceiling, and brought the remains of the reaper's support apparatus down on top of them with a roar.

For a moment, all was quiet.

She came to with Joker's voice in her ear.

"Do you copy? Come on; don't leave me hanging, Shepard! Do you copy?"

"I copy. Did the ground team make it?" Something was on her chest, pinning her. She got her hands under it and pushed. Her shoulder ached – catching Miranda hadn't been kind to the joint – but she was able to wriggle out. Miranda was climbing to her feet, but Thane was trapped by another piece of detritus.

"They're all here, just waitin' for you."

She squatted to heave the heavy strut off of Thane, momentarily thankful for the Cerberus modifications. The drell was bruised, but otherwise fine. She gave him a hand up. "Ready to come home, Joker."

"We found you a quicker exit path. I'm sending you rendezvous coordinates. Do you copy?"

A bright indicator flashed on her HUD showing the direction they needed to move. Below it, the timer for the core overload ticked down. "Loud and clear. See you soon." The strain underlying his voice gave her more sense of urgency than the timer in her HUD.

She gestured for Thane and Miranda.
Her chest ached, and her shoulder burned, but none of it mattered. "Okay, gang. Time to run like hell."

The CIC was filled with people, crew members who'd paid their visit to the med bay and been drawn back to the center of action, unable to wait in ignorance on the crew decks. Garrus's team had made it back safely, adding to the crowd.

Someone was yelling. "We have to leave! We have to leave NOW!"

Joker ignored them. He'd gotten the Normandy as close as he could to the exit EDI had found. The damaged generators made an uneven rumble as the ship hovered above the surface of the base.

Somewhere within it, Shepard was running.

She had to be running.

Her teams’ vid feeds hadn't been working since she'd fired the cain; the audio was patchy. The heart rate monitor kept blinking, though. Next to it on the screen was the time, ticking down the seconds until the base blew.

Behind him, the under-current of fear was growing. He wasn't the only one with a timer.

Joker pushed himself up, grabbing the gun from the holster on his chair.

"Hold it steady, EDI. Close to the surface as you can." Shepard was going to make it – and she'd have a swarm of angry collectors after her. He wished he had a bigger gun. Or a smaller ship – tiny enough to fly into the base and meet her halfway. While you're wishing, how about a body that could support a full suit of armor and handle the kickback from that krogan shotgun? What he had was a pistol and a pair of fragile legs, and he took both to wait in the airlock.

He pulled gloves and face mask on in the airlock. The collector base had a thin external atmosphere, leaked interior gasses trapped by its immense mass effect field. Enough that he didn't need more protection, as long as he stayed within the Normandy’s airlock. As long as he wasn't out there for longer than ten minutes or so.

In ten minutes, none of it would matter.

The seconds dragged by. He saw the collectors before he saw her. They came boiling out of another hatch, angling to block the route to the Normandy. He missed his first shot, but the predator had a faster rate-of-fire than Shepard's carnifex, and the second and third hit home. A drone fell, tripping the one behind it.

Thane was the first of the team to emerge, running long and low, slipping around collectors rather than fight them. Miranda was behind him, biotics flaring as she cleared her path. Behind her... no one. His heart froze. Then a blue glint; Shepard's armor, too far behind.

She wasn't going to make it. There were twenty collectors between them, and EDI was chanting seconds to zero.

Rhi looked up at him, and squared her shoulders. His heart caught in his throat, but before his mind could form words she was gone. A brilliant splash of blue light burned across his retinas, and then the thin atmosphere shook with a muffled boom, and she was there, bare meters away, biotic tracers running down her body, a collector corpse flying away from the spot she'd landed, its blood
staining the shoulder of her armor.

She ignored it and ran, a beeline for the *Normandy*. Joker bit his lip and fired, dimly aware of Thane and Miranda beside him doing the same. She was almost there. A bullet bounced off her shields, then another, and then they fizzled out with a visible flicker.

Rhi leapt for the airlock.

It should have been enough, but it wasn't, quite. The *Normandy* slipped sideways the tiniest bit relative to the base, and only her armored fingers closed on the deck plating. He caught a glimpse of her face, twisted in sudden pain, as he put a bullet in the head of a collector that was taking aim at her.

Her fingers started to lose their grip. He wanted to reach for her, but knew he was useless – his bones would break, or she'd pull him out, and they'd both tumble to their deaths. His heart was screaming, wordless grief and rage, at the collectors and at his own inability to pull her to safety when she was so very close, *No, fuck no, no, don't do this to me again* –

And then a scaled hand wrapped around her forearm; Thane, grabbing the arm that clung to the ship. Miranda reached for the other, and together they hauled Shepard up and into the *Normandy*. The airlock was already cycling as she got her feet under her, hunched sideways over an unseen wound.

The lock opened to the interior, and suddenly EDI's chant was clearer. "Detonation in 12… 11…"

Shepard staggered to the far wall under her own power and then slid down it, boneless. Joker didn't have time to worry; all their lives were depending on him, now. He could only hope. And fly.

"10… 9…"

"Yeah, I get the gist of it, EDI! Hang on!" The explosion of the collector ship had been felt for kilometers; when the base blew, nowhere in the area would be safe. He staggered to his seat. The *Normandy* shook, but she flew, lifting clear of the collector base. He used every bit of power she had, scorching the station with the thrusters. Joker brought them about hard and ran towards the relay, aware of the crew tense and silent behind him, of Shepard still collapsed on the floor. He felt her absence at his shoulder, a fear too big to consider. *Hope. And fly.*

He skimmed the top of the debris field as long as he could, going as fast as the battered ship could handle, and found her an opening with a clear shot at the relay just as the base blew.

The explosion was massive. The wave of force was made visible by the debris it picked up, a wall of destruction rushing towards the *Normandy*. He raced it to the relay, ignoring the hell behind them, zeroed in on the hope of safety ahead.

The relay seemed slow to fire, and for a fleeting moment he panicked – had the IFF suffered damage they were unaware of? – then it caught the ship. The *Normandy*'s damaged hull strained with the change in pressures, indicators climbing from green to orange as the time within the relay mounted. There was no sound from Shepard behind him. Had she been hit while they pulled her onto the ship? *Hope and fly.*

Then they were through.

He shoved himself out of his chair, set on Shepard. She was still lying where she'd collapsed against the wall, blue armor scorched by gunfire. Miranda was crouching over her, omnitool out.
As he lurched closer Shepard pushed Miranda away and climbed unsteadily to her feet. He almost collapsed with relief. She took two tries to remove her helmet and let it drop the floor. One arm hung limply at her side, but she was upright and breathing, turning to face him with a cocky half-grin.

"Commander –" He was struggling to fit what he wanted to say into words that were fit for the CIC and the watching crew when she grabbed him roughly with her good arm and pulled him into a kiss. He stumbled in surprise, but her arm was strong on his back, and his were around her, one hand finding a grip on her armor while the other tangled in her sweat-drenched hair, and their lips were warm together, hot with victory and remembered fear.

He forgot everything in that kiss – the ache in his legs, the sharper pain of his ribs, the misery of the last few days – everything except the fact that they were alive.

He forgot the crew standing around the CIC, looking towards the cockpit and their commander for direction.

Forgot them, until they started applauding.

It started quietly, and he didn't notice over the thunder in his ears, but soon it was impossible to ignore, and his mouth was still on Shepard's, tasting warmth and blood and life, breathing in the heavy scent of sweat and smoke that clung to her. When he opened his eyes and pulled back for air Rhi was grinning hugely; he blushed furiously and grinned right back. Then he kissed her again, the terror and desperation fading beneath his happiness. Her lips were warm and demanding, and he demanded right back, tasting her for a long moment before he whispered, "Everyone's watching."

"I know." She sounded gleeful. She was laughing at him, and he loved it.

He was looking at her because… well, because he really enjoyed looking at her, obviously, could look at her for days on end, and he'd get to, too, because they were alive – but also so he didn't have to look around at the faces of his crew-mates. He didn't mind showing off at the helm of the Normandy, but he wasn't used to being on display. "What do we do next?"

"I think," she said, "I'm gonna fall over."

"That sounds like a really good idea." Knowledge of their safety was sinking in, washing away his adrenaline. His ribs twinged, his legs ached, and his whole body was telling him to sleep for a week. But not alone. His grinned stretched wider, and he kissed her again, then looked around for the doctor. Rhi was leaning, trusting more of her weight to him than she would have if she'd been unhurt. Chakwas was making her way forward with a determined 'straight to the med-bay' look in her eye that he wasn't going to argue with.

The doctor was there when they stepped apart, ready to offer a supporting shoulder to Rhi and an arm to him as she herded them through the gauntlet of bemused and beaming crew towards the elevator. If they said anything, it didn't register. There was only Rhi, safe, and the finished job behind them. Safe on the Normandy. Shepard's wounded pace was as slow as Joker's limp – and her triumphant, smug smile was almost as big as his own.

Chapter End Notes
I can't believe it - 40 chapters later, and it's actually done! There'll be a few loose ends tied up in the epilogue - I can't let them go that easily - and, with any luck, I'll get rolling on a sequel. But the story I started almost two years ago, with no expectations of readership and no clue what I was getting into, is pretty much concluded. I can't tell y'all how amazing it's been to have so many of you read and respond to my writing.

And as always, many, many thanks to my beta Tera Danielle, who regularly saves me from my self and has reliably seen this behemoth through form near the very beginning.
“The first three are ready. We'll drop Rolston off on Illium; I've found him a ticket home under another name. Kelly wants off in the first group, too – she really hasn't been doing well.” Miranda frowned and passed Shepard a data pad. “Being off the ship will be good for her.”

Shepard took the pad in her good hand, scanned it, and passed it back. The doc said she had at least four days left with the sling, and she wasn't arguing. Not when she still couldn't raise that arm above the level of her shoulder.

Kelly Chambers was having a hard time. The ordeal seemed to have hit her worse than the others. The second day after they emerged from the Omega-4 Rhi had taken Chambers aside and given her a chance to spill her guts. She sat calmly while Kelly cried, piecing together the words garbled by tears. Kelly had been reporting secretly to the Illusive Man; she'd wanted to believe the best of Cerberus, to deny the evils because she couldn't believe anyone could do those things; she'd been trapped and Shepard, had saved her, not Cerberus, ; she was guilty, guilty, guilty –

Shepard had waited for a gap in the tears, picked up her hand – Kelly would want physical reassurance – and gently told her that she'd known all of that all along. Chambers had gaped and gasped and eventually burst into tears again. Rhi patiently explained that she'd monitored the supposedly-secret transmissions and knew Kelly's regular reports had been standard psych evals, nothing that would do any harm. Privately Shepard thought the Illusive Man had picked an awful spy; Chambers was too naturally open for that kind of work. The horror of the collector abduction seemed to have brought her internal conflict to the surface, breaking whatever mental armor she'd put up.

Even with her secrets in the open and Thane's help working through the persistent memories of the attack, Kelly was a shell of her former self. Rhi wasn't surprised she wanted off the Normandy sooner rather than later.

As for the others, they'd gotten out with fewer injuries than Shepard would have imagined possible, all taken during the collector attack on the Normandy and healing well under Chakwas expert care. None had voiced any desire to return to the Illusive Man's control. The bulk of the crew had always been more ex-Alliance than Cerberus. Only Jacob and Miranda had been true believers, and when Miranda turned at the collector station, Jacob faithfully followed her.

Shepard's crew would stay with her if she asked, but she wouldn't. Idealism crumbled under logistics: without Cerberus funding, she couldn't pay them.

She'd promised Liara help going after the Shadow Broker, and it sounded like there'd be credits in that. She’d run with a skeleton crew while they worked that job, then... well, ‘then’ would have to take care of itself. She couldn’t keep a ship the size of the Normandy running for long without outside funds. Not without an unbelievable amount of debt. Or an unconscionable amount of piracy.

The complex problem of dispersing the crew without dropping anyone into Cerberus' hands was a good match for Miranda's experience and guile. She rattled off a few more details, but interrupted herself part way down the list. “Shepard, why are they letting me do this?”
“Do what?”

“Arrange their cover. I was one of the Illusive Man's top operatives. But they're trusting me to keep them out of his hands.”

Rhi nodded. “Answer's in the question. They trust you, Miranda. Because you won't turn them over. Everyone knows you made your choice back on the collector base.”

They walked on in silence for awhile, through the mess hall. When they reached the elevator Miranda spoke again. “I… I never had many people I thought I could trust. And those… some of them… betrayed me.” She paused. “I suppose I've never really had anyone trust me, either. The Illusive Man relied on me, of course, but I'm not naive enough to think he trusted me.”

Shepard smiled. “Changes things, doesn't it?”

“Yes.” Miranda smiled self-consciously. “I have to admit, I… rather like it.”

“It's a good feeling.” Shepard smiled again. “Maybe you'll get used to it.”

The elevator door opened on the command deck and she walked out, nodding at the crew on watch as she did a circuit of their stations. They saluted back, or nodded, or grinned. There seemed to be more grins than there had been; whether because they'd succeeded in their mission or because of her display with Joker directly afterward, she wasn't sure. Probably the latter – she'd caught a few of ’em winking at Joker over the last few days.

Mostly she pretended she didn't notice.

There'd been a few comments (which she clearly wasn't supposed to have heard) about what she and Joker had done after they left the medbay for her cabin, mostly based around how long her shower had run. She hadn't been terribly surprised to find out that someone scurrilous was monitoring life support, but she thought the happy gossipers would be surprised by what had – or mostly hadn't – happened in the privacy of her quarters.

For instance they probably didn't suspect that the heat had made her faint, or that she'd lost her balance, caught herself on the wall, and slid to the floor. They certainly guessed that Jeff had been in the shower with her – but not that he'd realized he couldn't help her up and joined her on the floor instead, sitting on the tile a foot apart, hot water streaming down them while they laughed their asses off.

The closest they'd gotten to physical intimacy during the half hour the water had run was when he picked up her good hand, kissed it, and muttered 'And they say romance is dead' while water dripped off the end of his nose.

They'd both been too injured for anything else. The next morning was even worse – everything always hurt more the day after, and even worse the day after that – but it didn't matter. It would pass; his ribs would heal, her abrasions would close, and in not-very-long-at-all they'd both be interested in doing more than lying on opposite sides of the bed, occasionally moaning at each other.

Having someone to moan at was novel in and of itself. She grinned at the memory as she finished her round. Patel saw it and grinned back at her.

Yep. On the lam from their employer or not, smiles were definitely flying a bit more freely.

She climbed to the command post, giving Kelly a supportive touch as she passed. Kelly grinned
Neither Joker nor Tali had wanted to send the *Normandy* through another relay until she’d had a thorough going over, and Shepard didn’t want to dock at Omega looking like easy pickings, so they took their time, drifting from the relay in towards the station on minimal power. It had taken four days to reach the first comm buoy; four days in which they licked their wounds, patched up their ship, and thanked their lucky stars. Four days before they had to deal with the world outside the *Normandy*.

The world was waiting for them at the buoy; a backlog of messages and bulletins that suggested their journey through the Omega-4 hadn't been quite as unnoticed at it seemed. The Alliance wanted intel (through both official and unofficial channels, Shepard was amused to note), Liara wanted reassurance, and Wrex wanted an immediate real-time call.

*Why Wrex, of all people?* Curious, she had a call patched through the main display.

An image started to shimmer into place where the galaxy map normally glowed, but she heard Wrex’s voice before it cleared.

“ARE YOU DEAD AGAIN, SHEPARD?!”

He roared so loud the whole CIC heard him, and Rhi rocked back on her heels. When the image came through the massive krogan was standing too close to the pick-up, filling the entire screen. “WELL, ARE YOUD DEAD AGAIN?”

Shepard spread her good arm in an innocent shrug. “Don't think so,” she said.

“Good,” Wrex grumbled. “Good. Once is enough for anyone. Hmph. Watch your back out there.”

She smiled to herself, charmed and befuddled. “What brought this on, anyway?”

He stepped back enough that the vid pickup could catch more than just his face and brandished a helmet at the screen. *Her* helmet; the burned and broken one she’d picked off Alchera in her daze.

*How the fuck did Wrex end up with that?* She hadn't given it a second thought after dropping it – she didn't even remember where – somewhere in the *Normandy*.

“Thought it was some kind of message. If you're not dead again, then what in the name of Shiagur is THIS about?” He waved the helmet.

Shepard planted a fist on her hip and swept a disapproving look over her crew. “I haven't the faintest idea. Anyone? Why does Wrex have that thing?”

Beside her, Chambers cringed. “I, er, mailed it to him…”

She dropped the scowl. “What? Why?”

“I, it, uh – Joker said to!”

“For shit's sake, I was being sarcastic!” Joker's voice came through her earpiece, but he said it loud enough she could faintly hear him from the helm, too. “I can explain later,” he said more quietly, for her ears alone.

“When?” she asked Chambers.

“Right after Alchera – as soon as we hit a transfer station. Shipping from the Terminus Systems to
the Krogan Demilitarized Zone isn't exactly regular,” Chambers pointed out.

Wrex nodded. “Got held up in customs. Have to let the turians poke it and prod it and cover it with official stickers before they let the krogan have a chance at it.” He grinned, revealing a huge mouthful of teeth. “Never know what kind of super weapon we could make out of a broken helmet. HA!” He looked at it again. “Mistake, huh? Want it back?”

“No!” She realized that came out a bit too forcefully and backed off. “No, no, just toss it out or something. It's trash.”

Wrex held it under his arm. “Think I'll keep it, then.” He grinned again. “Good to remember you came back from that, Shepard.”

“Wrex.”

“Shepard.” He nodded and closed the connection.

Rhi stared at the place where his image had been, bemused. What the hell was that all about?

——

Joker would never have thought it possible if he hadn't heard it himself, but there was no doubt about it: Wrex's speech had 'protective family member' dripping from every word.

Rhi's walked up behind him and he turned to grin at her. “Wow. Wrex, huh?”

“Wrex what?”

Joker chuckled. “It's like he's practically adopted you. What happened on Tuchanka?”

“Nothin'. Adopted? What the hell are you talking about?”

“He had 'overly protective family member' written all over him. You may not recognize an angry paternal figure, but I sure as hell do.” In his mind's ear he could hear Wrex bellowing 'keep your hands off my little girl' – which was hilarious any way you looked at it. And slightly terrifying.

Maybe krogan don't get like that when their kids date.

I can hope.

Shepard's brow creased. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, if he's ever on the Normandy, I'll be hiding under the bed.”

She was totally at a loss. Finally she said “I don't think there's an 'under' my bed – it's solid.”

“Leave it to Cerberus to build a ship without basic safety features,” Joker muttered. “Nothing's ever easy.”

It was no wonder she was confused. Rhi had run away before she'd reached the age where people even joked about scaring away the prospective suitors, and Wrex had been a member of her team.

He was about to explain when the light dawned. She raised her eyebrows at him. “Wait. You mean – really?”

“I mean, I'm not saying I've pissed off anyone's dad before – “ a brother, once, when he was 17.
That had been frightening, “– but it sure sounds like that.”

“That's ridiculous.” She rolled her eyes and leaned down, resting on the back of his chair, speaking more quietly. “Anyway. He'd probably just buy you a drink or something.”

“Drinks with a krogan? That's a slightly slower way to kill me, I suppose.” He leaned his head back, smiling up at her.

Her eyes were sparkling, warm with quiet laughter. “Just fly us to Omega, Joker.”

“Aaaaye, Com-man-der.” He winked.

She placed the briefest of kisses on his forehead – the only part she could reach – and sauntered back to the CIC, her happy laugh filling his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Writing aStSHB has been a long and rewarding adventure, thanks in large part to the truly unexpected response from all my readers. Thanks to everyone who's stuck with me through almost 400 pages of text and almost two years of writing!

And an extra special thank you to Tera Danielle, who's been beta-reading this monster and letting me bounce ideas off of her (occasionally at high speeds) since chapter four-ish. Tera, you've been amazing.

I don't know yet when the first chapter of the sequel will be up, or what the title will be (I am, as you may have gathered, absolute pants at coming up with original titles). I want to get a decent amount in the can before I start posting. If you're interested in the sequel you can watch here or check tumblr (ShadesOfMauve there, too). I'm sure I'll crow about it when I post something.

If anyone is re-reading or downloading to an ereader (I just found out you can do that!), I did a fairly thorough rewrite of chapter 4. I'm also still tweaking mistakes all over, so if anyone catches anything, please let me know!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!